Xu Zhen & MadeIn Company: The Phenomenon of Artist-Company

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Xu Zhen & MadeIn Company: The Phenomenon of Artist-Company

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# Table of Contents

**List of Illustrations** ........................................................................................................ i

**Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 1

1. Overview of Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company ................................................................. 2

2. The Artist-Company: A Controversial New Pattern within the Contemporary Art Scene ......................................................................................................................... 5

3. Structural Overview of the Thesis .................................................................................. 12

4. Research Methodology .................................................................................................. 17

**Chapter 1: A Case Study of the “Arrogance” Set (2015) by MadeIn Company** ...... 20

1.1 From Xu Zhen and his Institutions To Xu Zhen as his Institutions ......................... 20

1.1.a. Intertwining Art Practice with Institutional Participation ..................................... 21

1.1.b. The Nomenclature of Xu Zhen’s Art Institutions .................................................. 31

1.2 The “Arrogance” Set (2015) by MadeIn Company .................................................... 34


**Chapter 2: Three Pairs of Comparisons** .................................................................... 44

2.1 Andy Warhol and the Factory vs. Xu Zhen and the MadeIn Company .................... 44

2.2 Jeff Koons and his Personal Studio vs. Xu Zhen and the MadeIn Company .......... 52

2.3 Takashi Murakami and the Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. vs. Xu Zhen and the MadeIn Company .................................................................................................................. 58

**Chapter 3: Three Theoretical Aspects** ........................................................................ 66

3.1 Artist-Company: As A “Privatization” of the Means of Production under post-Communist Art Context ................................................................................................. 67

3.2 The Always Paradoxical Conception of “Art Autonomy” and “Institutional Critique Art” ......................................................................................................................... 75

3.3 The Value of Referencing the Model of Exodus .......................................................... 83

**Conclusion** ..................................................................................................................... 90

**Appendix**

A. Interview with Xu Zhen ................................................................................................. 92

B. Email Interview with Takashi Murakami ................................................................. 108

**Bibliography** .................................................................................................................. 109

**Illustrations** .................................................................................................................. 113
List of Illustration

Figure ........................................................................................................................................Page

[1] ShanghART SUPERMARKET ..............................................................................................1
[3] Chronological Tabulation of Xu Zhen’s Career ..............................................................20
Introduction

In early April 2016, a pop-up store called “Xu Zhen Supermarket” opened up at No. 1386 Yuyuan Road in Shanghai China. It was a fully stocked convenience shop and looked nothing special except for one thing: all the products for sale were empty packages and containers. The store existed for less than a month, from 8th April until 29th April, and received numerous curious inquires and complaints as the local newspapers mentioned comments from confused customers: “Are you kidding me?” or “You guys sell empty things!”

The store was named after artist Xu Zhen (b. 1977, Shanghai) who later explained in an interview that such a temporary fake store was just for “brand promotion”: “We won’t earn money from this. It’s a total loss. Even if we sell out everything, we’ll still lose money. You see, we sell the products at their original prices, and we have the rent and labor costs to cover. We do this as a sort of brand promotion, hope everyone can have some fun.”

“Xu Zhen Supermarket”, which can be read as a cynical and physically real knock-off of Claes Oldenburg’s Store (1962), was actually based on the artist’s

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《徐震:一个肉体上没有任何乐趣的人，精神如何生猛?》，文/蒯乐昊，《南方人物周刊》2016 年 4 月。

2 Author Unknown. “Xu Zhen: The Supermarket Is Just A Beginning, We’ll Have ‘Xu Zhen Store’ In The Future,” artron.net, April 11, 2016. Accessed from: https://read01.com/kgxEky.html#.We0O1hNSxn4

《徐震：“超市”只是开始，未来要开“徐震专卖店”》，雅昌艺术网 2016 年 4 月 11 日。
ShanghART Supermarket (2007, Fig. 1): First shown in ShanghART Gallery’s booth at Art Basel Miami Beach 2007, the work was a typical and well-organized Chinese convenience store where all visitors were welcomed to browse the shelves and buy items at the price of a 1:1 exchange rate with the local currency. The work prompted viewers/buyers to rethink their consuming behaviors by selling empty packages and containers instead of real products. ShanghART Supermarket attempted to take a critical eye to the structure of the basic value exchange system, and it suggested that the market system does not offer anything of concrete substance.

It is not an outrageous piece under the context of contemporary art when it was first presented at an art fair in 2007; however, there are some intriguing issues behind this more recent version of the store opening on streets. It is an attempt of social intervention, but what does Xu Zhen mean by saying “brand promotion”? What is the brand and why would an artist need to promote it?

1. Overview of Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company

Xu Zhen is one of the most representative artists of his generation in China. In the late 1990s, he graduated from Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts with a major in Design and Decoration. His early works, primarily video and performance, focused on intuitive expressions about physical and personal experiences in the turbulent social changes in China after the Culture Revolution. Rainbow (1998), a video work depicting an anonymous bare back turning red gradually to the sound of hands slapping flesh, was chosen for exhibition at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001.
This showing made the 24-year-old Xu Zhen the youngest-ever Chinese artist included in this oldest and most prestigious international biennale.

Following the show, Xu Zhen fast became a well-recognized artist. His work has been exhibited worldwide at the Museum of Modern Art (New York, 2004), the Mori Art Museum (Tokyo, 2005), Tate Liverpool (2007) and many others. He won the prize for “Best Artist” by the China Contemporary Art Award in 2004, and he was the commissioned artist for the Armory Show in 2014. Meanwhile, Xu Zhen has also formed a prominent role in Chinese contemporary art as a curator. His long-time participation in BizArt Center, a non-profit organization dedicated to contemporary art in Shanghai from 1998 to 2009, significantly helped shape the local art scene.

In 2009, after more than a decade of art practice, Xu Zhen announced that he would no longer associate his name with future creations. Instead, a newly-formed organization called MadeIn Company would serve as a substitute for his identity as an artist. This gesture suggested his intent to meld his name into an amorphous group of people; he shifted his focus from individual art creations to a collective, swiftly integrated practice. However, his identity “disappearance” was temporary. In 2013, MadeIn Company launched the brand “Xu Zhen,” much like “Marc by Marc Jacobs.” By branding the new line in this manner, Xu Zhen made himself both the boss of his artist-company and its sub-product: “Xu Zhen.” Therefore, “MadeIn

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Company," or more specifically, “Xu Zhen (Produced by MadeIn),” is the brand that the artist tried to promote in the guise of “Xu Zhen Supermarket.”

MadeIn Company operates several branches under its umbrella including a gallery (MadeIn Gallery), a graphic design studio (Tufa Design), an art festival (PIMO Art), an online-community based website (Art-Ba-Ba), and even an academy (MadeIn Mofa Academy) in development. Located in Songjiang on the outskirts of Shanghai, MadeIn Company occupies a factory space of approximately 5,000 square meters (c. 54,000 sq. ft.) and employs more than 40 employees (as of 2016). The building neighbors several big brands’ factories or warehouses including Coca-Cola, IKEA, and JD Logistics. Therefore, the location of MadeIn Company sends a clear signal about its ambition to become a large-scale enterprise, its artistic production goals, and its aim to expand audiences well beyond the tiny art circle into the broad, general public of consumers.

“Xu Zhen Supermarket” is precisely such a project by MadeIn Company that could confirm these intentions. It offers a notable example of the complex entanglement of ideological concepts, and its targeted audiences include those who are unconscious of the project’s artistry and ironies and those would-be consumers who have nothing to do with the art world. Moreover, not presented through another gallery, museum or art institution, the work appeared in front of the general public through MadeIn Company’s efforts. With a multiplicity of functions and roles, MadeIn can produce, display, sell, and circulate art without the traditional apparatus of a third-party institution. It is a new type of art institution that transcends, or bursts open traditional art institutions (i.e., commercial galleries, museums, etc.).
2. The Artist-Company: A Controversial New Pattern within the Contemporary Art Scene

Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Company is one of a kind. A similar and precedent case of such a company with multiple functions in the art world is Takashi Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. which once listed 18 interrelated items on its official website identifying “art textbooks,” “clothing,” “advertising,” and even “animal- and plant-handling and sales,” with exhibitions and artworks as primary operations of the company.⁴ Both Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki and Xu Zhen’s MadeIn are a new type of art institutions. They are companies owned and run by artists that operate issues of art production, presentation, management, and circulation in their own way. They are artist-companies while the artists themselves become CEOs. And this might be a phenomenon discard the classics and rebel against orthodoxy while tracing back.

Since the 16th century,⁵ the commonly accepted concept of being an “artist” has connoted with notions of creativity, talent, sincerity, and individuality. Artists, one might think of a titan with ascetic features like Van Gogh, have been seen as giants of thought and masters of creative articulation. Artists of this stature carry an aura of nobility in a moral and spiritual sense and seem to shun worldly concerns such as finances. In fact, some artists neglect such concerns on purpose because

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⁵ According to Bruce Cole, it could be traced back to early 16th Century, when artists were encouraged to read more literature and to be gentleman rather than craftsman. Cole, Bruce. “Artistic Training.” In The Renaissance Artist at Work: From Pisano to Titian, 30-34. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990.
they may feel “the most important glory for the identification of nobility arises from the social group whose idiosyncrasy is refusing to give up the high value of the spiritual for business rules.” In short, an artist’s rejection of such mundane concerns may actually define his or her place in the upper echelon of reverence. Thus, one of the implications of this cliché of the “artist as a noble spirit” is that the answer to the simple question of how artists make a living has been ignored. Specifically, determining how artists make art and money simultaneously has been largely unexplored. Moreover, a question arises of whether a fundamental moral underpinning conflict exists when attempting to achieve both aims.

However, jump back to our current contemporary art scene, we will see a different picture. Take the notorious billionaire superstar artist Damien Hirst as an example -- he openly employs teams of assistants under his name to help create artworks: “What's unusual about Hirst is the sheer magnitude of his machine - he employs more than 120 people [...] Team Hirst has become a formidable global brand with a production line, sales force, marketing team, public relations department, an administration block, and a finance and investment specialty. The idea of the poor, lone artist slaving away in a studio is about as far from the reality as one could get.” Rather than an ascetic artist isolating him/herself in the studio, Hirst is more like setting up a small kingdom.

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Hirst’s “machine” is far from being a unique case. Jeff Koons also supports and is supported by a “troop of 150 paid assistants.”

Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki used 25 assistants to perform specialized tasks for his works in 2003; this number increased nearly four times in 2007, and he has “[...] roughly one hundred employees stationed between three branch offices in Tokyo and New York.”

Moreover, the presence of scores of nameless assistants and staff members gravitating around most of the big-name artists lends evidence to this new phenomenon in the art world of the millennium. *The New York Times* has reported that Maurizio Cattelan “employs a group of assistants and fabricators who make his work” in Milan. In the documentary film *Never Sorry*, sculptor Li Zhanyang describes himself as Ai Weiwei’s “hands”: “I am just his hands to help out executing things for him.” Notably, Tracey Emin indicated that half of her 4-floor-studio is full of computers and offices with many people working for her. She emphasized the importance of teamwork by stating, “Anybody who wants to be an artist that thinks it’s just about being in your garret, painting, forget it, it’s never gonna work out for

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This phenomenon of the artist-company is indeed more prevalent than we imagined. According to a report in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2011, at least five out of thirty artists represented by the New York gallery Cheim & Read use studio assistants to produce their works. Though the data does not meet statistical standards, the fact that nearly 17% of the working artists today use, more or less, the pattern of company-like structures and operational methods to produce art makes it hard for us to ignore the phenomenon.

What is missing in the vast difference between Van Gogh of the 19th Century and Hirst of our current era? For me, the traditional notion of an artist as eschewing worldly concerns for the sake of his art was challenged during the emergence of conceptual art in the 1960s when the concept of the artist’s studio began to change. The studio shifted from the locus of art making to a complex of art practice, as famously exemplified in Bruce Nauman’s words, “If I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art.” The idea of “post-studio” art was thus born; “art making” could now comprise a multiplicity of roles and functions. With this monumental shift (which can be considered that it was initiated by Duchamp around WWI) came the need to update, indeed, revise the definition of the place and process of making art in the face of this emerging...

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concept. In the last few decades, this process has undergone a new set of transformations; many artists have turned their studios into offices, small organizations, and corporations (e.g., employing lawyers, marketing staff, etc.). The following booming art market in the 1980s also shed light on the formation of the artist-company phenomenon. In order to meet growing demands for art collections and exhibitions from not only collectors, but also major museums and corporations, many artist-studios gradually morphed into corporations, hired assistants, accepted commissions, and occasionally outsourced the physical production of works to proxy manufacturers (e.g., Richard Serra, Jeff Koons). One early example of the artist-company is Needcompany, established in 1986 in Brussels by theater producer and artist Jan Lauwers and choreographer Grace Ellen Barke. Needcompany is a multidisciplinary performance ensemble that produces theater, dance, visual art, video and film, and writing projects. It is one of the very first artist-companies that adopted a bureaucratic model driven by producing profits. Looking back at the stereotypical 19th century notion of the “noble and disinterested artist,” Needcompany’s declarative move to create a company, with its typical aggregate of business functions and profit-making goals, was bold at the time, even shocking, incomprehensible, vulgar, yet, in some peoples’ eyes, it was also heroic.

The “post-studio” art practice of the 1960s was definitely not the first time in art history that such issues have been raised; in fact, Hirst, Koons, Murakami, and other big-name artists’ artist-companies may recall the working contexts of the Michelangelo or Rubens studios. Yet, today’s artist-company phenomenon is controversial. On one side, alongside artists mentioned above, many regard the help
of myriads assistants as a symbol of success: this indicator can be traced back to Old Masters from the Renaissance and Baroque periods -- bypassing the Romantic era, and the ensuing myth of the lonely artiste maudit struggling for recognition. In the Renaissance era, it was widely accepted that several members of a workshop often collaborated on a single painting. The master-apprentice model and artist-workshops were coextensive with concepts of craft and art making; in fact, it was a common thought that collective work guaranteed perfectly attained details. Through progressive and lengthy training, the meticulous and painstaking skill of art making was taught to apprentices.

On the other side, it is precisely because of the emphasis on craftsmanship that some tend to oppose the kind of contemporary art practice that relies too much on assistants. Such artists stand like a chef with arms akimbo, giving out orders without touching any food; all the heavy and dirty kitchen work is left for others in the brigade to get done. This type of art-making process is totally unacceptable for “some collectors and dealers [who] put a premium on paintings and sculptures executed by an artist’s own hand.” Many critics feel the same way; they are not fond of the business model adopted by many artists. To their eyes, this corporate

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phenomenon casts doubts about the authenticity of the artworks produced by artist-companies and the sincerity of the artists themselves. Speaking to such concerns, David Cohen’s article “Inside Damien Hirst’s Factory” opens with a sharp question: “Did Damien Hirst do anything on this painting except sign it?”  

I have interests in trying to answer this question. It is also my primary concern here in this thesis to know how we understand this phenomenon of artist-company today, especially considering that controversies surrounding issues of the artist-company have cast a veil of silence or hush on the phenomenon but nevertheless, a well-known secret of today’s art world.

If we continue to hold the opinion that artists ought to be noble in mind and spirit, profit considerations should not taint their creative intentions, or let themselves be governed by business or corporate regulations. Then the answer to Cohen’s question is clear: no, Hirst did nothing on “his” so-called paintings.

However, how would this situation differ from Duchamp signing Fountain with a pseudonym? And this study argues that new situations require more complex treatment than pat moral dictates. Such questions are resilient and do not find easy resolutions, especially when taking into considerations art movements, such as Conceptual Art, that place emphasis on ideas rather than objects, or Pop Art, which reflects the mass culture and its commercial grip on our everyday culture. Pop and Conceptual art lie cozily within the established art world with corporate-based new studio practices, and it seems that we have already accepted the inclusion of both Pop and Conceptual art into our art history.

It is fair to propose the traditional judgment (money = bad / no money = good) does little to resolve the complexity of the facts at stake in the “art-as-business” phenomenon. One thing for sure is that an artist-company does not substitute an artist’s hands; rather, it serves as a multi-layered mediation for the artist to the market. A more rewarding task at hand is the attempt to understand why the adoption of the artist-company has become so widespread in the last few decades. If we take a moment to rethink about the names of Needcompany and MadeIn Company, we may realize that the contemporary artists are saying that they "need company;" and, in fact, most contemporary artworks are already "made in company." The name manifests the artist-company’s methodology and serves as a tautological comment on itself.

It is my intention in this thesis to understand why would (at least some) artists need to adopt the pattern of company into their art practice. And this study suggests that the artist-company is an effective and alternative way for artists to balance the influence and power of art institutions and the market by governing their own creations and artistically intervening in society.

3. Structural Overview of the Thesis

As mentioned before, the practices of Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. and MadeIn Company open up the proposition that certain artist-companies should be regarded as a new type of art institution, and this thesis examines the theoretical validity claims of this new art institution. As successors of the historical “Institutional Critique” of art starting from the 1960s, entities like MadeIn Company can
legitimately be seen as agencies blurring the thin and narrow boundaries of the art world and reaching out to larger public.

To better understand the artist-company phenomenon, this thesis will focus on the example of MadeIn Company. By defining and reflecting on the positive characteristics of the phenomenon of artist-company, this study argues that setting up this new type of art institution is a viable alternative to the art world; artist-companies can help artists keep with the world’s present complexities and challenges.

The discussion begins in Chapter One with an analysis of the artist Xu Zhen’s career and the “Arrogance” Set (2015) by MadeIn Company (Fig. 2). This piece references the idea of limited gift-sets in the context of commodity marketing and speaks to Walter Benjamin’s concept of “reproduction” and “repetition” in Andy Warhol’s works. Additionally, the piece reflects some typical strategies of contemporary art making such as appropriation, assembly, ready-made, and mass production. This aspect of self-reflection within the work reveals its critical significance.

By comparing the collective art practices employed by Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Takashi Murakami, Chapter Two aims to argue that MadeIn Company presents a unique transparency by putting the process of an artist-company’s image-making and ideology-shaping into the contents of its art production. Such transparency is rare among artist-companies and art making in general and serves as a self-reflection and a valuable contribution to the discussion of capitalistic societies.
Chapter Three draws on three theoretical aspects as a means to help unpack reasons why artist-companies emerged and how these entities reflect the present status quo of both the art world and the society.

First, if artists are considered laborers, then the artist-company could be considered a privatization of the means of production by the laborer. In his essay on art in post-Communism Russia, Boris Groys holds a critical opinion towards such privatization by saying that it “proves to be just as much an artificial political construct as nationalization had been. The same state that had once nationalized in order to build up Communism is now privatizing in order to build up capitalism.”

Groys’ observation has referential significance for understanding the particularity of MadeIn Company’s existence within Chinese socialism. As a matter of fact, Xu Zhen once described the model of his company as “a certain limited democracy.” By this assertion, he reflects the policy lead by Deng Xiaoping during the period of Chinese economic reform and suggests a compromised proposal under the reality of China: the application of business rules and market logic can balance the country’s political landscape.

Second, a topic worthy of discussion is whether the artist-company offers the artist more freedom and control over his or her work. The conception of “the

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21 Ibid. 166.

Autonomy of Art” by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*[^23] and his essay on the institution of art[^24] offers a look back to the historical evolution of the notion of autonomy and reveals conflicts between autonomous art and the material conditions of its production because the former “was constituted initially in opposition to the realm of instrumental reason.”[^25] He makes it clear that the autonomous status of art in bourgeois society is effective “only at the cost of relative lack of consequence.”[^26] That is to say, such autonomy keeps art in a small vacuum separate from the rest of the society; the critiques and alternative possibilities suggested by avant-garde art in bourgeois society do not really have the opportunity for realization. The artist’s autonomy is, therefore, a castle in the air while the artist-company can intervene in society by “bending over to business rules” and sacrificing the ideal of autonomous freedom. Similarly, as mentioned, the artist-company as a new type of art institution requires positioning such institutional practice into the spectrum of the historical Institutional Critique art. In *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, a book of essays examining new trends related to institutional practices, Pascal Gielen summarizes the limitations of the two previous waves of Institutional Critique art occurring in the 1960s and late 1980s-90s. Gielen

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[^25]: Ibid. 16.

[^26]: Ibid. 18.
states, “Critique of the institution is only possible thanks to the shelter of that same institution and the values it represents.” Benjamin H.D. Buchloh makes a similar argument when he suggests the presence of the “impulse to criticize [Modernism] from within, to question its institutionalization.” Andrea Fraser also expresses her standpoint that “Nearly forty years after their first appearance, the practice now associated with ‘institutional critique’ have for many come to seem, well, institutionalized.” Historical Institutional Critique art is a bottleneck with no breakthrough because it is a game played within the box; but the artist-company, in this study’s view, has the potential to take more concrete actions and to expand influence beyond the pristine, and at heart, unchallenging box of the art world.

Third, this kind of out-of-the-box thinking has its prototype in the concept of “the Exodus,” as discussed by philosopher Paolo Virno in his essay “Anthropology and the Theory of Institutions.” Virno describes the departure of the ancient Israelites from Egypt’s persecution as a unique solution, “Rather than submitting to the pharaoh or rising up against his rule, the Jews took advantage of the principle of the tertium datur, seizing a further and unprecedented possibility: to abandon the

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29 Ibid. 408.

‘house of slavery and iniquitous labour’.”  

Virno regards the Exodus as “unheard-of forms of self-government” and its narrative as “perhaps the most authoritative theological-political model for the overcoming of the State.”  

Similarly, artist-companies have followed suit by fleeing traditional art making and presenting formats and empowering independent artists to realize more control over their own works; the artist-company could be a form of small “self-government.”

The final chapter offers a short conclusion and suggests that some questions regarding the artist-company require attention: if widespread capitalism, in the world at large and in the art world, is inevitable, what are the potential repercussions? And, does this model require artists to collude with the capital to be successful? Or, can there be a more critical dialogue established between the two?

4. Research Methodology

This study of the phenomenon of artist-companies is certainly not a new research subject. Since the rise of interest in the art market in the late 20th Century, a plethora of articles and books have appeared on related topics and issues.  

However, compared to other art market studies, research on the intersection of art creation and the art market, especially the perspective of treating the artist-company as an art institution, has attracted relatively little critical attention.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

In this thesis, I intend to provide an in-depth analysis of the artist-company by taking the case study of MadeIn Company as an approach and drawing upon Institutional Critique theories and philosophies about art institution, in general. This paper holds a positive attitude towards the phenomenon of artist-company. Such a standpoint reflects, in part, Jean Baudrillard’s concept of “negation” and Paolo Virno’s emphasis on the value of choosing an “Exodus.” While Baudrillard points out the predestined invalidity of negation in the capitalistic society, Virno suggests a possible solution through setting up new forms of self-government. My reflection upon artist-companies also relies on inspirations from several other theorists and academic discourses such as Relational Aesthetics observed by Nicolas Bourriaud and New Institutionalism put forward by Jonas Ekeberg and practiced mainly by Nordic art institutions. However, some of these studies are not elaborated in detail because their investigations touch only slightly on the artist-company model.

In addition to the aforementioned materials and articles, my interview with the artist Xu Zhen for an article in *Esquire China* provides important insight for this study. Also, I found it tremendously helpful to quote from an email interview with Takashi Murakami that I conducted for a piece in *Bazaar Art*. Xu and Murakami’s ideas helped significantly in forming my thinking and understanding of their artist-companies and artist-companies in general, and I sincerely thank them.

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36 Both interview transcripts could be found in the appendixes of this thesis.
for their generous and sincere contributions. My hope is that this thesis can let readers understand some of the artists’ original intentions while it can also reflect my interpretations.
Chapter 1

A Case Study of the “Arrogance” Set (2015) by MadeIn Company

1.1 From Xu Zhen and his Institutions to Xu Zhen as his Institutions

Establishing MadeIn Company in 2009 was not a rash decision for Xu Zhen. Rather, his development as a well-recognized artist and vast experience engaging various art organizations and co-founding “art start-ups” suggests he had carefully planned to reach this destination. When analyzing Xu Zhen’s career, one can consider his two-decades-long (from 1996 to 2016) art practice in two phases: one, Xu Zhen and his intuitions and two, Xu Zhen as his institutions (Fig. 3).

The first phase, Xu Zhen and his institutions, extending from 1996 to 2009, Xu Zhen worked as an artist, the art director of Biz Art Center (比翼艺术中心), and the co-founder of Art-Ba-Ba website (from 2006 to present) and Shopping Gallery (小平画廊, from 2008 to 2009). The second phase, Xu Zhen as his institutions, can be considered as beginning in 2009 with the emergence of MadeIn Company, then moving through the development of the ”Xu Zhen by MadeIn” brand and other ongoing projects under MadeIn’s umbrella, such as the creation of the MadeIn Gallery in 2014, PIMO (皮毛) Contemporary Art Festival's first edition held in

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37 Xu Zhen graduated from Shanghai School of Arts and Craft (上海工艺美院). He mentioned about his experience as not being a graduate from one of those more respectable art academies, and considered this fact being a reason that he started at the beginning of his art career as both an artist and a team player in various groups and/or institutions. Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Beijing, November 2015. See Appendix A of this essay.
November 2015, and a branch company named Tufa Design (突发设计), established in April 2016.

1.1.a. Intertwining Art Practice with Institutional Participation

Xu Zhen’s first known activity involving meshing his artistic practice with institutional participation was clandestinely inserting himself into Let’s Talk About Money - 1st International Fax Art Exhibition in 1996. Xu Zhen did not send a fax to the exhibition’s organizers like other artists because he was not invited; instead, he sneaked into the exhibition with a mocking fax. With this action, he challenged not only the “negotiation between original and fake, between perception and belief,” but also the more crucial question of who could get included in and presented by official art exhibitions, which touched on fundamental issues of artists’ institutionalization. As a fresh graduate and unknown artist, Xu Zhen’s trespassing communicated the strong statement that he was willing to take real actions. As word spread about his surreptitious appearance, Xu Zhen gained attention. This career debut was profound: his disguise as an artist made him a real artist.

Xu Zhen’s early works shared the quality of mixing eye-catching actions, provoking standpoints, and depictions of bodies driven by instincts. For example, in I’m Not Asking for Anything (1997), Xu Zhen repeatedly threw a dead cat against a

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39 In this essay, the titles and dates of Xu Zhen’s artworks are mainly according to “Chronology of Works by Xu Zhen” published in Xu Zhen/ MadeIn: I Am Positive (edited by Qibin Shen and Zhenhua Li. Shanghai: New Art Group Press, 2014), pp. 416-421. But, for this video piece, Chris Moore stated it being created in 1997, the following year after Xu
wall and the ground in a small room until its bloody carcass vanished into small pieces. This work fit together the two slang expressions “beating a dead horse” and “no room to swing a cat,”\(^\text{40}\) and in the process, challenged moral judgments on violent actions. In *Rainbow* (1998), an anonymous bare back gradually changes from beige to red to the sound of slapping on the back by hands, an image that transforms pain and its marks into a peaceful visual rhythm. In *Shouting* (1999), Zu Xhen shouts in public spaces, capturing confused facial expressions of the passersby, thereby depicting a metaphor of a person dominating others. The dominated cannot simply look away or ignore this invasive show of power.

*Rainbow* was included in the 49\(^{\text{th}}\) Venice Biennale in 2001, making the 24-year-old Xu Zhen the youngest-ever Chinese artist to participate in this important international exhibition. At the end of 1998, with Davide Quadrio, Xu Zhen set up BizArt Center in Shanghai, thus beginning his involvement in the city's first primarily non-profit contemporary art organization.\(^\text{41}\) During its existence, BizArt tremendously influenced the art landscape in Shanghai in two ways: firstly, most of the artists who had solo exhibitions at BizArt later signed with the ShanghART

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\(^{40}\) It is David Eliott’s interpretation in his “In the Face of History -- Chaos and Rectitude in the Work of Xu Zhen.” in *Xu Zhen* (edited by Moore, Christopher, 25. Berlin: Distanz, 2014). However, whether these English slangs were partly the artist’s original intensions remains questionable. One thing for sure: through his violent handling of the cat’s carcass, even though the cat was already dead before being thrown, Xu Zhen was doing something unacceptable by common sense deliberately.

\(^{41}\) Some articles say that Davide Quadrio was the founder of BizArt, and he invited Xu Zhen to be its art director; while others describe Xu Zhen as a co-founder. A pretty convincing review of the BizArt’s history, written by Chao Jiaxing, is a main reference on this topic. Chao, Jiaxing. “The Twelve Years of BizArt.” *Art World*, April 2015. Accessed from: http://www.yishushijie.com/magazines/content-4123.aspx
Gallery (香格纳), one of the top galleries in China, and secondly, the organization produced 198 art projects or exhibitions, including concerts, poet readings, dancing shows. In short, BizArt contributed significantly to the development and success of Chinese artists. For this reason, BizArt is considered historically significant both in the contemporary art field and among the general cultural strata in Shanghai.

Working full-time as its art director, Xu Zhen set the tone for BizArt while continuing to create artworks as an individual artist at the same time. Like other artists who had received supports from BizArt, Xu Zhen also reaped the benefits of exhibiting his works at the institution. He held his first solo exhibition at BizArt in 2001, titled, “A Young Man,” then signed with ShanghART Gallery, and in 2005, held his second solo exhibition in the gallery’s H-Space.

Xu Zhen’s art attracted serious attention from the art world through these two solo exhibitions and several of his representative works were created during that period of time. For instances: Given the use of sound as a main theme, Road Show (2002) can be seen as an updated version of Shouting with pornographic elements. Acting like a rock star and facing a crowd of people, Xu Zhen loudly imitated the sounds of a woman having sex into a microphone. The intended, uncomfortable awkwardness produced by this performance echoed the discomfort elicited by his first video piece of beating the dead cat. While I’m Not Asking for Anything focused on violence, Road Show homed in on sex. Xu Zhen repeated and often combined these themes in many of his works: The Problem of Color (2000) shows a nude male in standing or reclining poses with red liquid leaking from his

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42 Official records show that Xu Zhen was its art director from 2001-2010. Xu Zhen (edited by Moore, 185. Berlin: Distanz, 2014.)
bottom; *Untitled-Female Hygiene Cotton* (2001) is a sculptural installation of large-scale tampons; in *Baba* (2002), two young girls implore their father to curb his masturbation habit; *A Person Quiver* (2003) presents erotic photos taken from the Internet, one depicting semen-like material dripping from a woman’s tongue and a rotating, vibrating machine at the image's back; in 2006 when Xu Zhen transferred his interests to political and social issues, he produced *An Animal* (2006), a work depicting three men masturbating a panda-looking dog to ejaculation onto a glass table.

Sexual references in Xu Zhen’s works were occasionally exaggerated but always direct. He was willing to talk about and make fun of sexual topics, an uncommon attitude, considering conservative traditions in China. On the one side, these choices may reflect that Xu Zhen’s art were intuitive in the early part of his practice. On the other side, these choices may reflect he was familiar with art history. Art critic and professor of art history, Lu Mingjun, mentioned his surprise that Xu Zhen knew so much about art: “...his learning ability is particularly strong, sometimes when we are discussing artworks, he would immediately exemplify a few similar art concepts by artists overseas, and then show us the images right away -- even though he cannot pronounce their names correctly.”

In this sense, it seems appropriate, especially for Western viewers, to interpret his art in ways that connect to famous contemporary artworks. For instance, *Road Show* (2002) could be considered as “homage to Vito Acconci’s...”

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performance Seedbed (1972).” In fact, many references to contemporary works abound in Xu Zhen oeuvre. 6th March (2002) often reminds viewers of Tino Sehgal’s relational art practice. Like Sehgal’s work in which volunteer performers interact with viewers in a gallery space, this piece involves a hundred volunteers dressed in blue-striped tunics and black slippers, the uniform for mental patients, who stand in a gallery space and closely follow visitors viewing other artworks. In Comfortable (2004), a minibus, a type of cheap vehicle used by small construction teams and freight companies in China, is converted into a functioning washing machine filled with clothes and luggage. Xu Zhen’s use of minibus mirrors the Volkswagen bus appearing in Joseph Beuys’s The Pack (1969). Untitled-Dinosaur (2007)’s fake dinosaur’s internal organs of pigs and cow’s offal directly references Damien Hirst’s The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991) and Away from the Flock (Divided) (1995).

It seems, however, that Xu Zhen did not come by this extensive knowledge of contemporary art through academic study, but rather through self-motivated learning and information found on the Internet. His Internet-browsing habits seem to have informed the development of the Art-Ba-Ba website in 2006 into “an online

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46 Chris Moore has discussed in details about this piece, commenting that it is “(partly) a game of one-upmanship, but not necessarily with Hirst”; “as a symbol of imperial power, Xu Zhen’s dino is deliberately ambiguous and anachronistic”; and “as a critique, it is visceral”. Moore. Xu Zhen. 11.
community-based website with focus on promoting contemporary art” in an early-stage Bulletin Board System (BBS) format. Introductions to artists (mainly international) and their artworks are posted by and followed by artists, curators, critics, art lovers, students, art institutions and collectors. To this day, the website is considered the Wikipedia page of contemporary art in the Chinese language. The site links to more than 200 other art websites. It includes a collection of media briefings on recent exhibitions, a notice board for advertisements about events and exhibitions, an archive (with an alphabetized “Super Material” for easy referencing), a guideline textbook, an experimental online-zine, and a forum to discuss trendy topics among users, both famous and anonymous. In short, Art-Ba-Ba has gradually become an abstract, open, and collective opinion leader in the local art landscape in China.

Compared to BizArt, Art-Ba-Ba shares more similarities with the later Madeln Company in that Xu Zhen, together with friends and peers, constructed a framework that is in line with his unique manner of art practice. He popularized his methods of learning art history and made the Internet a teacher for other Chinese artists. For instance, Zhang Yinan, a former staff member of Madeln Company, was given the weekly tasks by Xu Zhen to deeply study three examples from the “Super

47 Art-Ba-Ba’s info on its website: http://www.art-ba-ba.com/about/main.art?page=about

48 Ibid

49 Art-Ba-Ba edits its contents and comments into two zines Jing Ye “精页”, 2008-09, and Ji He “几何”, 2010-12, together with ArtSpy website, with downloadable PDFs.
Material” column on the Art-Ba-Ba website and then come up with fresh project proposals based on this exploration.50

By the way, Art-Ba-Ba shifted from non-profit to for-profit status in June 2007,51 perhaps signaling the progression of Xu Zhen’s conceptualization of art making as a large scale. Supporting this conjecture is Art Ba-Ba securing sponsorship from the clothing brand JNBY and MadeIn Company, respectively during 2008-2009 and 2010-2013.

Back to Xu Zhen’s independent art creations: by 2007, Xu Zhen had built a reputation as an iconic Chinese contemporary artist, primarily through the production of three seminal works: Dang Dang Dang Dang (2004), 8848-1.86 (2005), and ShanghART Supermarket (2007). Dang Dang Dang Dang (2004) was first exhibited at the 2004 Shanghai Biennial. Xu Zhen took the clock tower at Shanghai Art Museum as his medium and altered its movement to run at a significantly higher speed (approximately 60 times faster than a standard speed clock). At midnight of the Mid-Autumn festival, the clock chimed to mark the opening of the biennial, accompanied by the music of Red East, a classic political propaganda song. Xu Zhen explained to local media that the speeding “symbolize[d] the amazing rapid development of Shanghai as an international metropolis.”52 The use of the clock also served as a metaphor that encouraged viewers to look critically at the wisdom of the

50 Zhang Yinan, conversation with Qianfan Gu over phone, Shanghai, February 18th 2016.

51 Art-Ba-Ba lists its fund-raising sources here: http://www.art-ba-ba.com/main/thinks.art In 2007, it was supported by 13 individuals including Xu Zhen himself.

extraordinarily fast economic development throughout China and the institutional power symbolized by the building. In short, this piece effectively questioned the accuracy and high standard that are always represented by official institutions.

Another work that effectively established Xu Zhen as an important Chinese contemporary artist is 8848-1.86 (2005). In 2005, a press release claimed that, “Xu Zhen, together with his team, climbed the 8848.13 meters of Everest. They succeeded in slicing off the hill top and taking it down from the mountain.” Tents, various types of equipment, photos, notes and diaries, and a video recording the process were displayed at the ShanghART Gallery. At the center of the exhibition space, a showcase freezer measuring 1.86m high (Xu Zhen’s height) sat on “the hilltop.” All its visual evidences were so convincing that “many reviewers writing about the show accepted that the climb had been made and that Everest was now a bit shorter.”

Xu Zhen’s choice of Everest, a spiritual symbol of nationalism for Chinese, seemed to reference the fraught controversies surrounding Tibet’s independent issue and its tense relationship with China. This work also comments on our understanding of “the truth.” Was Everest’s height actually 8848m to begin with? In other words, is what we have learned true? In addition, the work causes the viewer to question the veracity of Xu Zhen’s claim that he had sliced off the summit. Should we simply believe what others tell us? The subtraction of Xu Zhen’s height from the reported original height of the peak also seems to send the message

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that individuals have the power to question and even reduce the power of authoritative and institutional claims.

Xu Zhen continued to prompt normative perspectives with *ShanghART Supermarket* (2007), first shown in the gallery’s booth at Art Basel Miami Beach 2007. Xu Zhen presented a fully stocked Chinese convenience store in which visitors were welcomed to browse and buy products at the price of a one-to-one exchange rate with the local currency; however, the products for sale were all empty packages and containers. In this work, Xu Zhen causes viewers to consider whether their hard-earned income is being used to purchase “value-less” products. Selling products with no concrete value forced viewers to rethink their consumption habits.

These three pieces, quite different from Xu Zhen’s earlier works, showed his shift of interest from intuitive expressions to more socially conscious works that often contained institutional, art and otherwise, critiques: compromising the functioning of the Shanghai Art Museum clock tower, “slicing off” Everest’s summit, and revising the value exchange rules in an economic system.

An even more socially-involved project was Xu Zhen et al.’s opening of *Shopping Gallery (小平画廊)* in July 2008, soon after Quadrio’s departure from BizArt in 2007, in M50 (the primary contemporary art district) in Shanghai. The short-lived gallery existed for only one year and hosted approximately ten exhibitions. Its ambition to gain revenue was evident in by the use of the word “shopping” in the gallery’s name, Despite its clearly-stated goal, the “artists-run-gallery model” turned out to be quite a disaster. Co-founder Vigy Jin explained, “Including me, Shopping Gallery has 10 shareholders. I am the only one who is not
an artist; they are all artists, and they have always wanted to look for someone with potentials to exhibit.” Jin, who has maintained her partnership with Xu Zhen to this day, continues, “What’s the result? Well, we always sold out without really earning money. All the artists represented by Shopping Gallery were very young and had very little former exhibition experience; their works were thus quite cheap. Some small-size paintings, for instance, cost only four or five hundred RMB each (c. less than 100 USD). That’s the reason why we were still losing money even though all the artworks in a show could be sold out. That was what those artist-shareholders love because the whole thing was so experimental.” Vigy’s words explained Shopping Gallery’s failure: the artist-owners emphasized the experiment rather than giving equal weight to the practical considerations of the business side. In essence, Shopping Gallery was an art project camouflaged by the appearance of a commercial gallery.

The failure of Shopping Gallery marked the turning point between the two phases of Xu Zhen’s practice. His lack of success in this pursuit might partly explain the reason Xu Zhen would embrace an authentic business model with the establishment of the MadeIn Company; perhaps he wanted to avoid the difficulties he had experienced in creating entities (e.g., BizArt) not entirely meant to produce revenue. Xu Zhen’s last solo presentation as an individual artist was The Starving of Sudan (2008), “his most controversial (at least in the West)” piece, exhibited at the “Impossible is Nothing” exhibition at the Long March Space in Beijing. The work

56 Moore. Xu Zhen. 13.
reenacted the scene depicted the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph by Kevin Carter, who committed suicide shortly after the controversy sparked by the award. The original picture, taken in Sudan during the 1993 famine, shows a starving toddler trying to reach a feeding center while a vulture stalked her. Xu Zhen’s piece employed an African boy, coincidentally born in Guangzhou to an immigrant family from Guinea, positioned in front of a life-size animatronic vulture. The installation was open to the public, and photography of the piece was welcomed. This work challenged our social morality of watching; it documented suffering rather than intervened to alleviate suffering. In 2009, not long after this shocking piece, Xu Zhen announced his retirement from individual artistic practice and service as the CEO of Madeln Company. At this juncture, he officially moved into the second phase: Xu Zhen as his institution.

1.1.b. The Nomenclature of Xu Zhen’s Art Institutions

When analyzing Xu Zhen’s first phase, one obvious yet intriguing observation is that the three entities he created, BizArt, Art-Ba-Ba, and Shopping Gallery, can collectively be seen as a single work of art. Looking more closely at each of the names reveals a shared sense of Chinglish, conjugated with a steep dose of humor. Similar to the title of a piece of art, the naming of each institution presents layers of meaning.

BizArt sounds like “bizarre” when hearing the word the first time, and is also a compound word abbreviating “business” and “art.” As one of the very few nonprofit art centers in China, “its name was meant ironically, since neither artist
intended to make a business of selling art. Instead, they offered their services --
graphic design, art advising, tour organizing -- and then funneled earnings back into
(it)." 57 Consequently, a nonprofit art institution calling itself “business-art” is
nonsensical, even “bizarre.” Moreover, the Chinese name for BizArt, “比翼 (bi-yi),”
an onomatopoeia of its English name, provides insight into the intent of the
institution. “Bi-yi” uses the first two characters in a common idiom that describes
two birds flying wing to wing; the idiom is often used as a metaphor for happy
lovers or close collaborations. The Chinese name conveys a strong image meant to
comment on the relationship between business and art -- as two happily flying pals.

Art-Ba-Ba’s name is a playful word game that directly references the Chinese
website Alibaba (阿里巴巴), a hugely successful, privately owned, Internet-based e-
commerce business group. The website’s name references the story “Ali Baba and
the Forty Thieves” from 1001 Nights. Established in 1999 by Ma Yun and a group of
seventeen investors in Hangzhou, the organization has been promoting online
businesses in China for years by combining and localizing the business models of
eBay, PayPal, and Amazon. In 2012, “two of Alibaba’s portals together handled ¥1.1
trillion yuan ($170 billion) in sales, more than eBay and Amazon combined.” 58 Once
again, Xu Zhen was playing with the concept of business and art by naming his non-

http://www.artnews.com/2012/03/29/risky-business/
58 Author unknown. “E-commerce in China: The Alibaba Phenomenon.” The Economist,
chinas-e-commerce-giant-could-generate-enormous-wealthprovided-countrys-rulers-
leave-it
profit “Art-Ba-Ba,” and perhaps by referencing a commercially successful website, he was portending the success of Art-Ba-Ba.59

This same logic continued with Xu Zhen’s naming of the Shopping Gallery, which pointed to the essence of commercial galleries, and used the same characters as the famous politician Deng Xiaoping’s given name “小平 (xiao-ping)” for the gallery. This choice spoke to Deng’s activities as a reformist leader who led the country towards a market economy after Mao’s death. The connection between “shopping” and Deng’s was a conscious choice by Xu Zhen and the other founders to designate such a clear relationship.

Xu Zhen also frequently uses puns and ironic expressions to convey meaning, prompt discussion and question concepts. So common is this nomenclature, the practice could be considered a hallmark of his art practice. The name “MadeIn Company” is no exception. Observant art critics would immediately make a contextual connection to the large number of products that are “Made in China.” In his article “Art, Inc. Shanghai,” Travis Jeppesen explains, “MadeIn Company seemed a pungent response to the particularities of the time that bequeathed it, responding both to a local situation -- China and its rising tide in the art world -- as well as the global economic structure, where the ubiquitous ‘Made in China’ label serves as a source of consternation to those apprehensive of the red totalitarian state’s brisk rise to superpower status.”60 Besides Jeppeson’s points, the Chinese characters “没

59 A supplementary explanation comes from Chris Moore. He considers the name of Art-Ba-Ba as a reference to Xu Zhen’s early artwork BaBa (2002); and also “the name itself recalls babble, and the Internet is clearly its Babylonian tower.” Moore. Xu Zhen. 15.
60 Travis Jeppesen. “Art, Inc. Shanghai.” Art in America, April 2013, 91.
“顶 (mei-ding)” are also a wily pun with manifold interpretations. Literally, the characters mean something “with no top,” but also means “a company without a head,” or “a company drowned by head” when put together with “company”. In this way, the name is a joke Xu Zhen made on himself. As the “head” of the company, it seems that Xu Zhen is aware of his precarious position, in a pessimistic way: the company could exist without him, or he could harm the company -- drown or destroy it.

Furthermore, semantically speaking, the name “MadeIn Company” conveys an action that describes a noun, rather than a noun itself. This aspect of the name communicates a sense of instability in the definition, suggesting a new form in development rather than a defined, established part of art history. It is a verb phrase that lacks of subject that leads us to further questions: How, by whom and what are made in the MadeIn Company?

1.2 The “Arrogance” Set (2015) by MadeIn Company

Established in Shanghai in 2009, MadeIn Company held its first solo exhibition “Seeing One’s Own Eyes” with the perplexing subheading “Middle East Contemporary Art Exhibition” at ShangART Gallery that same year. The exhibited works, from paintings to installations, contained many Islamic cultural symbols: a boat covered with a Persian rug floating in a round pool of glue (Seeing One’s Own Eyes, 2009), sculptured foam in the shape of mosques (Hey, Are You Ready?, 2009), black abayas lifting and rotating like a carousel (Soul Has Been Replaced by Anxiety, 2009), and small desert castles built on a pool table (Dual Game, 2009). The
exhibition came off like a masquerade ball with Middle East attire as its dressing code. The exhibition seemed like a group show by several artists with culturally Arab backgrounds. For this reason, it appeared that MadeIn Company succeeded in changing its cultural identity. MadeIn Company choosing a Middle East theme for the exhibition was not random or vagarious but rather meant to convey a message about the evolution of the global art market. In May 2006, Christie’s held its first auction in Dubai, and “in fact, the opening of the auction house’s office in Dubai [had] led to a 400 per cent increase in Middle Eastern spending with Christie’s.”

The art market boom in the Middle East had been striking news at that time. At the same time, quite a few art collectors had shifted their interest from Chinese to Middle Eastern contemporary art. This phenomenon prompted MadeIn Company to create a fictional Arabic identity for itself. By creating this alternate reality and mistaken identity, “MadeIn Company challenged viewers to doubt an exhibition’s validity even though the artworks and ideas were presented as facts.”

The next representative project by the MadeIn Company was the Physique of Consciousness (2011) created in 2011: a set of calisthenics performed over video that was composed of more than two hundred movements derived from dance, gymnastics, and spiritual and cultural rituals. The sequence was highly interactive, and the audience could follow the video recording in museums. Inspired by gestures from ceremonies, worship rituals and political movements, MadeIn Company later

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created *Physique of Consciousness Museum (2011)*, a variation that presented each movement's religious or social background, contextual meaning, and related artifacts' images in glass cabinets.

Given the needed research, preparation and execution requirements, both of these works were challenging to produce, but MadeIn Company's efforts in producing each piece proved that significant art creations can capture collective wisdom and labor, far beyond a single artist's personal capability. Although Xu Zhen created the idea, the entire MadeIn Company made the idea become a reality. As a result, it is fair to credit such works to a collective team rather than one artist's name. In fact, the “About Us” link on MadeIn Company's website includes a list of the 27 employees. MadeIn Company is not an anonymous group of people under the control of Xu Zhen, but a team with specific identities and contributions.

Furthermore, these two works point out that MadeIn Company aims to expose the role of image making in culture and ideology. This emphasis on image-making is a continuous thread in understanding their works, including the next artwork in his study, “Arrogance” Set (2015) (Fig. 1).

### 1.2. a. Why is the “Arrogance” Set (2015) Considered a Set?

On the occasion of the first anniversary of its inauguration, the Long Museum in Shanghai hosted Xu Zhen's solo exhibition in spring 2015. This exhibition showcased over one hundred works, including Xu's earlier representative pieces and a series of new works produced after the launch of MadeIn Company.

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63 It's not a complete list of all the staff, since Xu Zhen said that MadeIn now has about 40 employees in more recent interviews.
The exhibition left a strong visual impression on viewers because Xu Zhen chose to exhibit all the editions of each work, such as five identical sculptures of *Eternal Life* (2015) lined up in a row, five exquisite porcelain vases from *MadeIn Curved Vase* (2013) installed in showcases, and even his early video work, *Rainbow* (1998), was presented in the form of five screens on one wall. Some viewers commented that this presentation format was a “mad exhibit,” suggesting the experience was overwhelming and confusing.

The exhibition also included “*Arrogance* Set” (2015) for the first time. In keeping with the retrospective and the repetitive aspects of the exhibition, Xu Zhen showed three sets of “gift-box” artworks, among which the “*Arrogance* Set” was the largest. The work contained eight artworks by Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company’s previous art projects. The works were encased in a 3.24-meter-high black box with four wheels with each piece tucked inside thick foam. Each piece in the set was identical to other artworks in the exhibition, but also presented as sets in a row of five identical boxes as editions.

With this piece, Xu Zhen presents repetition in two ways: firstly, repetition through the editions of a piece of art, and secondly, presenting pieces repeatedly in the same exhibition. Moreover, the works in the sets appear as gift boxes, a concept borrowed from commercial culture that often displays the most desired products into a special box, with special and enticing wrapping. In this way, Xu Zhen hearkens

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邱月烨，《没顶公司：当代艺术的现代化工业革命》，二十一世纪商业评论，2015 年 5 月刊。
to the multiplicity of identical products for sale in the marketplace, even as these very products are packaged to appear handmade or one-of-a-kind, thereby justifying greater value. With these multilayered, complex, and conflicted intentions in mind, Xu Zhen explains, “Art and merchandise are exactly the same. This is a concept of commodity, but it is more like artworks taking use of the commodity’s format. Thus it is art.” Unsurprisingly, the exhibition ended up looking like a large shopping mall and the works of art look like shelves full of inventory.

Xu Zhen also discussed his emphasis on the repetition in the exhibition, “[Speaking of] such kind of repeatability, I personally think it is more beautiful to show these works in groups rather than in singular form. This repetitive beauty may be rationally analyzed that it has relation with the commodity’s repetitiveness. However, it should not be simply understood as focus on commodity’s cost or the difference between the individual and the group -- it realized a shift, from quantitative to qualitative change.” For the artist, the repetition is first and foremost a personal aesthetic preference, and the referential comment on the format of commercial goods comes next. This said, Xu Zhen did not make the prioritization clear when referring to “a shift, from quantitative to qualitative change.”

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66 Ibid.
Repeatability plus the "shift from quantitative to qualitative" conjures up Walter Benjamin’s reflection in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*:

> The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality. The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation. The fact that the new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form must not confuse the spectator. Yet some people have launched spirited attacks against precisely this superficial aspect. 67

This observation might apply to Xu Zhen’s “shift from quantitative to qualitative” because MadeIn Company's productions are dependent on the participation of many, not just an independent artist. Participation in art production seems to have defined the “qualitative” change in Xu Zhen’s art practice, and such change was manifested in the repetitive presentation of *Arrogance Set*.

*“Arrogance” Set* can be considered a set because the format suits the artist company. Fashion and cosmetic brands sold in department stores offer gift sets as a way to express the products’ classic, elegance and worthiness. Similarly, through the artworks set, MadeIn Company highlighted their signature works. This format also proudly displays their method of making art.

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1. 2. b. Is the “Arrogance” Set (2015) Arrogant?

The “Arrogance” Set is not simply a re-combination of Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company’s previous works. It has a story to tell, or, according to its title, an attitude to project. “Unpacking” the gift box in clockwise order reveals this purpose.

The largest piece, Eternity-Poseidon and Squab (2014) from MadeIn Company’s “Eternity” series, is a life-sized sculpture positioned in the middle of the box, appearing almost as a centerpiece with smaller works surrounding it. In earlier works of this series, Xu Zhen placed replicas of classic headless sculptures from both the East and the West together. For instance, he connected the Winged Victory of Samothrace neck-to-neck with a Bodhisattva from Tianlongshan Grottoes. With this brutal juxtaposition, the artist linked the East with the West by ridiculing the cliché of cultural exchange. In Arrogance Set, Xu Zhen again plays with juxtaposition by placing the primary figure of the ocean with a dozen red-colored squabs (roasted or deep-fried squabs are widely considered a delicacy in Chinese cuisine) and one squab sits on the top of Poseidon’s head. Physique of Consciousness plays above these figures. The instructor wearing green performs gestures and movements, uninterrupted, against seemingly unreal blue-sky background.

An oil painting on canvas from MadeIn Company’s “Under Heaven” series sits next to the torso of the Poseidon figure. This painting was the highlight of the Armory Show in 2014 when Xu Zhen was named the show’s annual commissioned artist. The dense creamy flowers of varying shades of green make the canvas look like a slice of fancy pastry. A porcelain vase sits below the painting; a piece from the “MadeIn Curved Vase” (2014) series. The form of the vase is based on ancient
Chinese porcelains, and MadeIn Company mimicked these forms exactly except to bend the vase neck to 90 degrees. On the other side of the gift box next to close to Poseidon’s right foot are two empty cans, one Coca Cola, one Pepsi Cola, from the ShanghART Supermarket. A well-folded T-shirt from PIMO (皮毛) with a printed image from MadeIn Company’s “True Image” series sits above the soda cans. The t-shirt image is of The Feeling of Humiliation is Nothing But the Feeling of Being An Object (2012), a work depicting black horse with an erection and a poached egg sticking to its hind shank. The “True Image” is a series of photos taken of art installations, but the original objects no longer exist. Rather, the photographic images of the objects in the installations have been enlarged into posters or billboards or freestanding roll up banners. Each printed image has a long title often including a citation from a famous philosopher’s writings. The Dollar Man (2010), made of clothes and fabric from MadeIn Company’s “Limited Edition Toys” series, is positioned above the t-shirt. Lastly, the Focus-HASSELBLAD 500C/M (2011), a long aboriginal spear impaling the Hasselblad camera, stands at the far right side of Poseidon.

Why would MadeIn Company choose these eight pieces? What is the hidden logic or common criteria among them? Neither Xu Zhen nor MadeIn Company has offered answers to these questions. The following discussion provides some speculative explanations.

Firstly, green is echoed among several pieces in the box: the exercise instructor’s shirt, the paint in “Under Heaven” (2014), the vase with a twisted neck,

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68 MadeIn’s branch company that sells art derivatives.
and the figure made with dollars all contain green. Red, the contrasting color of green, also appears throughout the box, particularly in the squabs surrounding Poseidon and the soda cans. Apart from these similarities, the rest of the pieces contain neutral colors such as black, white, copper yellow. At a minimum, it is fair to conclude that Xu Zhen had a visual intent for these objects.

Secondly, taking the life-sized sculpture in the middle as a dividing line, the works to the left hand of Poseidon could be seen as high art (the oil painting and the Chinese porcelain vase) while those situated to the right are objects of mass consumerism (plush toy, camera, T-shirt, and beverage cans). The video piece placed above Poseidon’s head strongly references the spiritual realm, a place outside of either high or low art. This analysis of the pieces suggests that Xu Zhen carefully considered the eight pieces’ positions.

Thirdly, the perplexing juxtaposition of high and low art contains a hidden logic. The placement of greasy squabs around the figure of Poseidon suggests he is a piece of cutlery. The video piece conveys a spiritual world floating high in the air, as if an ideal to reach, but is actually simply a series of easily executable movements that remove each gesture’s original meaning. The oil painting looks very much like a piece of cake with rich cream and frosting, and definitely too good to be healthy. The vase has a dysfunctional neck, rather more like a loudspeaker than an elegant piece of art. The mass produced goods set a counterbalance to the luxury of the other pieces. Perhaps these choices reflected the reality of every gift box one receives. All contain both valuable and less valuable items, so the bargain of the box is that both the consumer and producer win.
The primary question, however, is whether “Arrogance” Set (2015) deserves the description of “arrogant.” By definition, the word “arrogant” means “exaggerating or disposed to exaggerate one’s own worth or importance often by an overbearing manner.”⁶⁹ None of the objects in the set is inherently arrogant; the artist has placed the once elegant, classic, or heroic art in line with everyday, consumerist products. Perhaps Xu Zhen is describing himself. He is the “arrogant” element in the composition of the artwork.

Chapter 2

Three Pairs of Comparisons

Xu Zhen may be the “arrogant” element in the composition of Arrogance Set, and this description may be justified as some believe MadeIn Company deserves credit as the “the world’s first art corporation.” This assessment, however, is inaccurate because many other artists formed artist-companies prior to Xu Zhen creating MadeIn Company. A short list includes Takashi Murakami’s Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. founded in 2001, the iconic Factory by Andy Warhol that operated from 1960s to the 1980s, and large-scale personal studios that employ artists and craftspeople to produce works conceived by superstar contemporary artists such as Cai Guoqiang, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Ai Weiwei, Zhang Huan, and Anish Kapoor. Although Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Company is not the first of its kind in art history, it is significant in its own way. Making comparisons to other artist-companies will establish MadeIn Company’s uniqueness and provide insight into the artist-company phenomenon.

2.1 Andy Warhol and the Factory vs. Xu Zhen and the MadeIn Company

Supporting the view that MadeIn Company is not just another artist-company, Art historian Philippe Pirotte asserts that “MadeIn takes the factory idea of Andy Warhol a step further.” On the surface, it is plausible that Xu Zhen, like

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Warhol, believes society is largely focused on consumerism, as reflected in Warhol’s provocative statement, “Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art.” This same sentiment could just as easily been attributed to Xu Zhen. In fact, Xu Zhen has said something similar, “All things in exhibitions are commodities, only the sellable ones are art.”

Although MadeIn consists of dozens of people, its name is almost equivalent to the name “Xu Zhen.” This is evident especially when it comes media outlets and the press captioning photographs of Xu Zhen with “Xu Zhen, aka MadeIn.” This phenomenon is the same with Andy Warhol and the “Factory.” Xu Zhen’s ubiquity in the mass media (beyond just the art press) serves to only perpetuate his fame, perhaps soon becoming as famous as Warhol. Unlike the previous generations of Chinese artists who would be proud of keeping a low-key reputation, fame is not a problem for Xu. He has a clear understanding of the value of a personal fame related to a commercial business, “Usually, the boss of a company would crave becoming famous because it saves fees on advertising.” For this reason, Xu Zhen does not feel uncomfortable about his widespread presence in mass media.

In some aspects, Warhol and Xu Zhen are quite different but still share a certain similarity. The choice of medium for art creations is a telling example. Unlike Warhol, Xu Zhen favors large-scale installations, especially in the works under the auspices of MadeIn Company. For instance, *Play-201301* (2013) is a series of

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73 Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Beijing, November 2015. See Appendix A of this essay.
sculptural installations in the shape of Gothic cathedrals made primarily out of black leather and metal chains, resembling a pile of sadomasochist sex toys. Like Warhol, Xu Zhen transforms consumer goods into an art installation with this piece, similar to the transformation in *ShanghART Supermarket*. Barbara Pollack comments that the Xu Zhen's Supermarket “evok[ed] Warhol’s Brillo boxes.” 74 Ironically, Xu Zhen’s preference for large-scale installations belie the process of producing the FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods), the dominant products of our consuming habits. Large-scale installations are made painstakingly slow with much care and time, and therefore, not as easily consumed, broken down or thrown away. 

This lack of the ephemeral echoes Warhol’s interest in film. During the Factory period, Warhol enjoyed taking long shots of daily routines, such as his friend John Giorno sleeping for five hours and 20 minutes (*Sleep*, 1963), the fellow pop artist Robert Indiana eating for 45 minutes (*Eat*, 1963), and slow motion footage of the Empire State Building lasting eight hours (*Empire*, 1964). In these films, Warhol placed emphasis on the long periods of time. He sometimes used only one single take, such as in *Vinyl* (1965), in which the camera filmed until reel ran out. He also tried a kind of “in-camera” editing, turning the camera on and off during shooting, as if placing punctuation marks between the images, causing a sort of strobe effect as in his 25-hour long film, *Four Stars* (1967). These art films also served as a sort of slowing down of a mass consumed product, television. Stephen Koch posits that, for Warhol, “time is saved” in films and “the revelatory tropisms of the flesh and face

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and person are redeemed and ‘immortalized.’” In this way, Warhol’s interest in the medium of film contained deep insights into the human experience.

Aiming to “immortalize” the runs counter to the ever-changing reality of consumerist society. In this sense, both Xu Zhen and Warhol are not faithful disciples of consumerism. Rather, they are sensitive observers who point to the hidden problems of a consumerist society.

Repetition of specific elements is another aspect common to the works of Warhol and Xu Zhen. Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (1962) appears as if a rack of soup cans were moved directly from a supermarket to the museum’s wall; his polychrome repeating portraits of celebrities, from Marilyn Monroe to Mao and to himself, visualized various personae beneath a celebrity image sharpened largely by pop culture; and his mass replication of all kinds of images through the silk screening process synchronized with the commercialization of culture.

In Xu Zhen’s case, repetition also manifested overwhelmingly in his solo exhibition held at the Long Museum in 2015. Each piece, newly-made or representative of the past, was arranged in identical copy queues. For example, twelve Gothic cathedral-shaped sculptures from the *Play-201301* (2013) series formed a new set, titled, *Group - Abstinence* (2014) and five racks stood filled with instant noodles and various snack packages from *ShanghART Supermarket* (2007). Here, the repetition served as a curatorial experiment with presentation, but beyond this attempt, the arrangements self-commented on the production of contemporary art.

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“Arrogance” Set, as mentioned, also appeared in this exhibition. The set of boxes spreads throughout the hallway space of the museum, one after another, all eight pieces of art sit perfectly in sponge in each large black box, and each set is the same as a nicely wrapped gift box. Five boxes are displayed, the number five indicating the edition number of the whole set. The number 5 also reminds the audience to pay attention to the edition number of artworks, usually stated in captions or descriptions on wall text but rarely noticed by viewers. In Arrogance Set, edition number is made clear, thus communicating a primary factor in assessing marketplace value. This factor is especially important in valuing photographs, sculptures and prints but often remains as a semi-secret among dealers and auctioneers. Unlike Classical works that imply uniqueness, contemporary artworks are often created in series, in different versions, or reproduced for a new exhibition contexts years after a first edition. This common practice results in viewers encountering certain artworks multiple times in different venues.

Rather than separate each piece in an edition across multiple venues, Xu Zhen puts all five multiples of the edition in front of his viewers. By doing so, he transports the audience back to the time before artworks were dispersed to various exhibition spaces or collections. This format shows the works of this edition just after production standing in a line waiting to be packed, transported and purchased, just as products “hot off” an assembly line. The concept of mass production is hinted at by the two cola cans in Arrogance Set but Xu Zhen shows how context can be altered, thus changing a viewers sense of the work’s value. Arrogance Set is a replica
of itself; here, the message contained in the repetition becomes as substantial as the contents themselves.

If Andy Warhol had visualized the reproduction of cultural products in the manner in which Walter Benjamin described, then Xu Zhen has made this phenomenon clearer by making himself an inseparable participant in the reproduction process of art. Although Warhol participated in the reproduction process, Xu's role in the process of repetition differs from Warhol’s practice largely because the focus on their practices differs.

Warhol’s underlying logic in his art was the meaning of watching itself. Koch explains, “he made everybody in his world watched. And what is being watched has a meaning, even if it’s only the meaning of being watched.”76 Warhol’s focus was to present things as they were, even himself, as Koch states, “Famous for being famous, he is pure image.”77 In Xu Zhen’s case, he also “watches,” but his interest is not “pure image.” MadeIn Company’s “Seeing One’s Own Eyes” exhibition spoke to this concept. It is impossible for one to really see one’s own eyes, even in a mirror. We can only see the mirror image of the eyes’ appearances. We don’t see our own eyes as independent and objective objects. The exhibition title suggests that Xu Zhen puts emphasis on the “presence” of things in terms of making the production process transparent. His artistic practice is revealed in the company’s name, “MadeIn Company.” The artworks are produced in multiple editions but he straightforwardly exhibits all editions at one time and place. As Xu Zhen concludes, “what MadeIn

76 Ibid. 6.
77 Ibid. 24.
represents is a method, and not content.” If we agree that Warhol made watching meaningful, in that everyone could get his or her “15 minutes of fame,” then Xu Zhen has made the production framework meaningful, so that each piece of artwork could achieve a second life in a brand new set. In other words, Warhol made watching meaningful by watching but Xu Zhen made frameworks meaningful by establishing the frame.

This assessment explains the destiny of Warhol’s Factory. Under the logic of “watching,” Warhol was surrounded by chic, cool people from many subcultures, including hustlers, call boys, prostitutes. It was a “festering underworld,” with “a door that was always open,” waiting to be watched. But even Warhol could not resist time. Therefore, “no one could get too much power, be a star for too long” and “Warhol’s world [went] fast; it [was] unlikely to long outlive the 1960’s that created it.” The Factory’s destiny was to make the underground visible, and “when that process was over, the show was over.”

Under the logic of the “framework,” all forty Madeln Company employees need to punch the clock to be on time for working. Madeln Company is well-


80 Ibid. 7.

81 Ibid. 25.

82 Ibid. 14.

83 Kuai. “Xu Zhen: As A Man With No Fun Physically, How Could He Be Vigorous Spiritually?” Nanfang People. Also, it is worth mentioning that hiring all college graduates is not an easy
planned, with several branches and departments under its umbrella. The
“framework” requires ongoing function; thus, stability and professionalism are
musts. Xu Zhen uses the analogy of an athletic training team to describe MadeIn
Company’s daily progress, “Just like the runner Liu Xiang (刘翔), he gets training
everyday. The speed record he broke in competition was not the first time he ran
that fast. It’s for sure that he runs at this speed quite often during training.”

If an organization’s sustainable development is considered a criterion for
success, then compared to Warhol’s Factory, Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Company truly goes
“a step further.” To be more specific, Factory functioned as a collective studio of
passionate artists, including Warhol. MadeIn Company functions more like real
factory with art production purposes. It stresses discipline, management, and
methodology.

This quality might ultimately constitute the essential dissimilarity of their
world-views -- Andy Warhol’s focus on death and fundamentally passive approach
versus Xu Zhen’s use of eternity as a theme and optimistic attitude. Warhol “is an
artist whose glamour is rooted in despair, meditating on the flesh, the murderous
passage of time, the obliteration of the self, the unworkability of ordinary living.”
Xu Zhen, on the other hand, clarifies his belief in the permanent, manifested in the
revealing titles of his works: *Eternity* (2013), *Under Heaven* (2013), and *Perpetual

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84 Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Beijing, November 2015. See Appendix A.

elaborated that: “Warhol managed to use his fundamental passivity to transform himself
into something rather like one of his own objects: Absolutely noticeable, yet apparently
absolutely meaningless.” (25)
Motion Machine (2009). He also leaves the impression of hard work and positivity.

In her book “Xu Zhen/Madeln: I Am Positive,” Li Zhenhua is quoted as saying to Xu Zhen, “I intend to title my essay with the quote, ‘I am positive’, from a conversation between you and Philippe Pirotte. Such an attitude of positivity seems that it may have been maintained throughout your work, alongside an attitude of openness.”

Certainly, Xu Zhen’s self-confident, positive attitude could translate to “arrogance,” and such an attitude might remind us of another artist: Jeff Koons.

### 2.2 Jeff Koons and his Personal Studio vs. Xu Zhen and the MadeIn Company

Xu Zhen’s personal image is very similar to Jeff Koons in that Koons is “famous for a public persona of relentlessly smiley, Amway-salesman unctuousness.” Xu Zhen often appears in a black suit when meeting the public and press. When he was nominated the annual “Man at his Best” by Esquire China magazine in 2015, he appeared in the magazine’s cover wearing a casual black suit jacket. It was reported that the photographer was surprised by Xu Zhen’s choice of attire and asked, “Are you an artist? Or a businessman?” Xu Zhen smiled without answering. At a later time, when asked again, he explained, “It doesn’t matter whether you look like an artist or not, it also doesn’t matter whether you are an artist or not. Everyone is just doing things.”

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88 Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Appendix A.
attire reveals an aspect of each of their backgrounds. Koons’ his father runs a small business, and he himself worked was a Wall Street. In Xu Zhen’s case, his father is a worker and carpenter, and Xu worked in the advertising industry for many years before graduating art school. Koons and Xu Zhen come from ordinary, middle class families, and both gained first-hand experience in the business world. In addition to these commonalities, the visual languages of the two artists contain similarities.

Many made the connection between Koons’ works and Xu Zhen’s solo exhibition at the Long Museum in Shanghai. In her exhibition review, Chinese art critic, Hanlu Zhang, wrote “Gods, immortality, eternity... even though the MadeIn Company did some covering for the artist, [Xu Zhen’s] plan of self-deification has never stopped. Another one who did the same thing - after finishing series artworks of gods then soon welcomed his personal retrospective show - is Jeff Koons.”

Madeln Company’s ongoing “Eternity” series from 2013 is the Chinese version of Jeff Koons’ “Gazing Ball” sculptures also from 2013. Koons’ combination of glittering blue balls and classical Greek sculptures has its counterpart in Xu’s combination of the Buddha statues and classical Greek sculptures. The blue gazing ball seems like a condensed symbol of Koons’ ideas and taste, and the juxtaposition of buddhas with Greek gods and goddesses by Xu Zhen is a condensed expression of his ideas and taste as well. Both artists communicate their ideas and taste with symbols of fine art; in this way, they convey ambition and self-confidence.

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Not only do they share similar styling choices, they also have similar personalities and manners. Koons’ attitude of self-acceptance and lack of criticism was shocking, but also influential in the art world. This generous approach has long been discussed. For some, the fundamental heritage of modern art is criticism of social and political issues. However, gallerist David Zwirner quoted Koons boldly asserting “[...] if you’re critical, you’re already out of the game.” Koons’ view suggests that criticality is outdated; it is now merely a strategy to make successful art, and no longer as effective and powerful in today’s art world. During a symposium titled “The Koons Effect” at the Whitney in 2014, Jordan Wolfson touched upon this Koonsian-acceptance in a more profound way by connecting self-acceptance to “the acceptance of death, the acceptance that the universe is indifferent.” Wolfson further rationalized such acceptance accepting Koons’ controversial success, “[...] we can just accept that this man made amazing work and we shall all embrace living in an amazing time that Jeff Koons exist in, and it’s amazing to be here.” Koons’ self-acceptance is a key point in understanding much of his art because he often uses mirrored materials, particularly in his signature large-scale sculptures. The highly reflective surface of the works is a visual manifestation of his concept of self-acceptance.

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92 Ibid. [52’40”]
It is unclear whether Koons influenced Xu Zhen or whether the similarities between the artists are coincidental. Xu Zhen appears comfortable with himself, expressing an almost naïve self-confidence, “Perhaps a lot of artists experience confusion or whatever; for me, I don’t have such things.” He also mentioned his take on harsh critiques towards him, “Yes, I do [read negative feedback]. [...] But actually I don’t feel such comments are helpful.” Xu Zhen keeps on working, without questioning himself. His works are seemingly uncritical, just as Koons.’ For this reason, he has received sharp criticism, “Perhaps, Xu Zhen is simply unable to recognize such things: he chose to collude with the times, rather than be a more liberal, uncommon, and critical creator.” Indeed, Xu Zhen has mentioned that he now had no intention to position a critical stance in his work, and he holds a different opinion on Koons’ work as “not being critical”:

I don’t feel being critical is good or bad. There exists no such question. What Jeff Koons said is that “if you are critical, you’re already out of the game.” I won’t say it will be a thing as “out of the game,” but once you want to be critical, you are actually entering into another room from the current one. There might be a relationship combining your confidence and diffidence. What I’m about to say might sound like some Oriental philosophies... that is to say: I don’t care. Just pick up the things you need, and that’s enough.

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93 Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Appendix A.

94 Ibid.


96 Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Appendix A.
For most Chinese people were raised in an educational system that puts emphasis on collectivist ideology, critical thinking is a Western concept. Very much like *Eternity* Madeln Company, Xu Zhen is “not being critical,” but rather combining Western learning and Oriental philosophy. Xu Zhen does not feel the need to express a critical attitude in his art, as he explains “The feeling of being uncomfortable is the start of being critical. So theoretically, I feel that criticizing is not a necessary thing [...]” For self-confident, self-accepting person such as Xu Zhen and Jeff Koons, criticality is excluded.

Self-acceptance, however, is only one side of a coin. The other side is the desire to change the world. In his review of the Koons exhibition at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in 2008, Graham Bader writes, “The exhibition’s gallery guide touts Koons’s aspiration to create work that functions as ‘a powerful vehicle for self-acceptance and a democratic tool to transform the world’ [...]” It is doubtful as to whether Koons has produced a “democratic tool to transform the world.” His success seems markedly un-democratic. After all, others cannot easily apply his formula for success, and considering the fact that 150 assistants help him, Koons seems to be the lone and most significant beneficiary of this success.

Speaking of the “democratic” component of art, Xu Zhen seems keenly aware of the pros and cons of the artist-company format in terms of serving the individual voices and perspectives of the artists and craftspeople he employs. Xu Zhen explains, “The model of the company is a certain ‘limited democracy.’ The model of the

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97 Ibid.

company isn’t perfect.” Perhaps, in a democratic society such as the US, Koons does not need to transform his world into a democracy. In China, Xu Zhen’s “limited democratic” mode of artist-company certainly has its potential to make some real changes. This prospect was especially encouraging from 2009 to 2013, the period when MadeIn Company was just created and the branch “Xu Zhen by MadeIn” had not yet been launched. In 2012, critic Colin Chinnery optimistically expressed, “Whereas many commercially successful artists are exploiting the aura of the artist to make products for the market, MadeIn kills the artist’s aura in order hold on to the work’s integrity. For this reason we can announce: Xu Zhen is dead, long live MadeIn.”

Even after his name surfaced in the public in 2013, Xu Zhen’s original intent to encourage more people to participate in art creation through setting up artist-companies is still influential among local artists. For example, the MadeIn Company established its location in the unpopulated outskirts of Shanghai; however, at the first PIMO Contemporary Art Festival organized by MadeIn in 2015, nearly 40 artists in the same neighborhood participated in the “Open Studios” section. Through the MadeIn Company, Xu Zhen indirectly encouraged the growth of the local art ecology in Shanghai in just a few years.

Unlike Koons, Xu Zhen has a bigger picture in his mind, a picture that includes not himself but also his peers, employees, and competitors. He somehow sees the existence of MadeIn Company as his social responsibility, “[The art world in

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100 Colin Chinnery. “Made by MadeIn.” In Xu Zhen / MadeIn: I Am Positive, edited by Qibin Shen and Zhenhua Li, 64. Shanghai: New Art Group Press, 2014.
China is facing a severe lack of talent. It is a scary thing. [...] the form of a company could be a security to avoid loss of talent in the art profession [...] company is like a reservoir."\textsuperscript{101} Compared to Koons’ success, Xu Zhen has not yet reached the level at which he can realize this vision, and what he has done has not produced a democratic society as of yet, but he is on his way to change the art world, and possibly beyond.

2.3 Takashi Murakami and the Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. vs. Xu Zhen and the MadeIn Company

This study does not aim to place Xu Zhen on a higher moral level than Koons but rather calls to attention key differences in Xu Zhen and Koons’ approach to their respective studios. Koons is, without any doubt, one of the most influential artists of our time, and his studio model calls for its owner to take full responsibility for its successes and failures. That said, Koons deserves applause for his success but questions about whether his model can be considered a “democratic tool.” An examination of Takashi Murakami and his Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. and Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Company, however, is akin to conducting a business analysis between two companies of very similar type.

Kaikai Kiki can be traced back to the Hiropon Factory founded by Murakami in 1996 in Japan. Within only five years, Hiropon developed from a small workshop-like team into a professional art production and management organization, which was officially registered as a company in 2001. In many respects, Kaikai Kiki can be

\textsuperscript{101} Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Appendix A.
regarded as MadeIn Company’s predecessor, not only because the company was created ten years earlier than MadeIn Company, but also both businesses’ scopes are similar. The Kaikai Kiki website once listed eighteen interrelated items identifying “art textbooks,” “clothing,” “consumer goods,” “advertising,” “websites,” and last but not least “all tasks accompanying all of the above,” as primary operations of the company.102 Similar corresponding items and or projects are also listed on the MadeIn Company website: “art textbooks” and “websites.” Moreover, the Art-Ba-Ba website contained “Super material” and PIMO’s website lists “clothing” and “consumer goods,” including the t-shirt found in the “Arrogance” Set and “advertising” is found on TuFa Design’s website, a MadeIn Company branch that focuses on promotional advertising designs related to art.

Additionally, Kaikai Kiki does not only belong to Takashi Murakami. The company includes seven signed artists, similar to an agency for actors or football players. Similarly, the MadeIn Gallery operates under MadeIn Company’s banner, and now lists 22 artists. Interestingly, Murakami and Xu Zhen’s names appear in their companies’ lists of signed artists; they are simultaneously an artist represented by the agency and the boss of the company.

Unsurprisingly, similar organizational structures and business models produce similar artworks. For instance, ShanghART Supermarket and Kaikai Kiki’s Superflat Museum (2003) bear striking similarities. ShanghART Supermarket, a seemingly real and true supermarket, welcomed regular shoppers daily from 7am to midnight. The work contained a full stock of drinks, snacks, cigarettes, and daily

necessities, but, as mentioned, the packages were empty. The eye-catching sign “Fill the void!” in the shop was a joke playing on the fact that none of the “products” offered any concrete substance. In this project, the participation from public, the reversal of conceptions, and the ironic attitude match aspects of Murakami’s *Superflat Museum* (2003). Released in late 2003 and early 2004, packages of a Japanese shokugan (meaning “snack toys”) gum, brochures, and certificates produced by Kaikai Kiki could be purchased at Japanese convenience stores for about ¥350 yen (about $3). This work spoke to Murakami’s practice of mixing high art and mass culture as a way to spread artworks widely and cheaply. Cartoonish characters, like Mr. DOB and flowers with smiley faces, are subjects in his large-scale paintings and sculptures, but also appear on all kinds of merchandise from key-chains, pins, mugs, to t-shirts, and even Louis Vuitton bags. Of *Superflat Museum*, Rothkopf comments “a little plastic artwork in the guise of a tchotchke in the guise of an artwork in the guise of a tchotchke.”

Murakami gained inspiration from mass culture, which led him to create lovely and popular imagery that was put into the art category, but then sent these images back to the mass market where they originally came from. In this sense, Xu Zhen also performed this sort of transition. His view on the cultural phenomenon of the supermarket fueled the birth of the *ShanghART Supermarket*, which put these ideas into the art category, and then he sent them back to the streets where consumers could purchase them.

*Superflat Museum* and *ShanghART Supermarket* also share two other similarities. Firstly, although a regular customer could purchase components of each

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103 Ibid. 139.
of these works at an extremely cheap price, the seemingly affordable art would never be owned fully. Murakami created 10 figures for Superflat Museum’s five series and every shokugan remained sealed in boxes; each item of Xu Zhen’s commodities in his supermarket was the same price as those in other stores, but no one could buy the entire whole store. Like product lines that always change, the items of these two projects were very difficult to collect “as a whole” in a practical sense. Also, the question remains: is the purchased object, a shokugan or an empty package, an artwork itself?

It is difficult to answer how Murakami or Xu Zhen would answer this question because the objects in both works contained elements of art and manufactured products. Brochures and certificates with serial numbers were offered with shokugan, and fliers and explanations were offered along with receipts by shoppers at the supermarket. Strictly speaking, just like their comments on the shokugan culture or the supermarket, the products they sold were the same manufactured, desire-making, commercial, and purely visual, empty products sold by companies.

The “Möbius-like marriage of high and low”\(^\text{104}\) is shared by both artists and is in-line with the adoption of the company format in their art creations. Despite these similarities, however, as the old Chinese saying goes, “the peers tend to scorn each other.” Xu Zhen does not feel happy about being compared to Murakami, believing such comparison is a misunderstanding. He explains, “Some people see us as Takashi Murakami. We are never the same as him. Murakami is a failed artist in

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\(^\text{104}\) Ibid. 134.
Japan. His success must be set up on the acceptance from the West; without such Western acceptance, he did not have a sense of presence.” Xu Zhen’s argument may be harsh; yet, by mentioning “the acceptance from the West,” he points out a critical difference between their practices.

The main theme in Murakami’s art is Japanese subculture. From his artistic training in traditional nihonga painting, to his preference for manga and anime, and his appropriation of shokugan, Murakami presents the eccentric otaku culture, homebodies without a social or love life. The Western audience who are strangers to such things need all these borrowed terms from Japanese language to understand Murakami’s cultural background. Gabriel Ritter concludes that there exists in Murakami’s art a “realization of a ‘uniquely Japanese awareness of beauty,’” which “appears inextricably bound to the otaku sensibilities of Japanese social outcasts.” More than that, this unique beauty is a bit of a shortcut considering its focus on marginal culture. Ritter continues, “Because of otaku’s marginalized role in Japanese society, it seems tempting to associate their aesthetic sensibilities with a new Japanese avant-garde as materialized through the work of Murakami.”

This methodology is reminiscent of Warhol exposing New York subcultures of the 1960s. Including Murakami, the seven artists represented by Kaikai Kiki have a consistent art style in terms of visual language and subject matter. Like those cool guys from

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the underworld of New York surrounding Andy Warhol, Murakami keeps himself surrounded by a group of *otaku* artists.

The characteristic is not shared by Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company because the artist is not interested in issues of his Chinese identity. He wants to jump out of the stereotypical classifications based on geopolitical backgrounds of certain artists that have been set up by the mainstream contemporary art world. More importantly, the core value of Xu Zhen’s art is to question various forms of ideology. *8848-1.86*, for instance, dwarfed the height of Mount Everest, the symbol of authority and nationalism; *Untitled (Dinosaur)* made a joke of the success of contemporary art represented by Damien Hirst; *Starving Sudan* questioned the so-called political correctness of watching. Ironically, *Starving Sudan* “was in fact originally planned for a London based institution that didn’t dare to mount the project for fear of litigation,”107 showing that censorship not only happens in China. *Seeing One’s Own Eyes* pointed out that the identity of artists is an illusion that can be manipulated easily and *Physique of Consciousness* revealed the accessibility of almost all kinds of spiritual and ideological practice. Xu Zhen does not have an old-fashioned story from the Far East to tell, neither does he surround himself by a group of artists like him. The 22 artists represented by MadeIn Gallery have vastly different artistic practices: from performance artist Liu Chengrui, painters Xiao Xiong and Zhang Hui, to text-based conceptual artist Lu Pingyuan, and post-internet artist Miao Ying.

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Reviewing Xu Zhen’s past art creations, it is clear that he tends to express his comments on various cultural and social issues in an ironic but uncritical tone. For this reason, this study asserts that his adoption of the company is a comment on the company. In addition, taking his habits of nomenclature into consideration, “MadeIn Company” could be seen as a comment on the phenomenon in today’s art world that many artworks are “made in company,” such as those from Murakam’s Kaikai Kiki, but are not explicitly communicated as being “made in company.”

If it is agreed that Murakami found the operational mode of a company a prime way of presenting Japanese *otaku* subculture, then it can also be agree that Xu Zhen’s self-reflective adoption of a “company” is the best format for him to present the logic and ideology of contemporary art making. The relationship between Murakami’s art and Kaikai Kiki is a relationship between content and format; while in Xu Zhen’s case, MadeIn Company and “made in company” is simultaneously content and format.

One last item remains in terms of this analysis. Rothkopf wrote, “It is tempting - comforting, even - for an art critic or historian to discuss Murakami’s high/low trafficking in terms of his symbolic manipulations alone.”\textsuperscript{108} The use of the word “trafficking” is intriguing because it communicates the sense that Murakami is involved in illegal activities, or at the very least, some disreputable practices. That assessment might be exactly the opposite of what Murakami had thought about in adopting the mode of a company in the first place. In an email interview for this study, Murakami mentioned, “if you want to cooperate with a group of people, you

need to obey the requirements of law and regulations; thus I chose to establish a company instead of studio.” Xu Zhen expressed similar ideas in his choice of the company mode rather than any other collective formats, “I think the form of company is very reasonable.” Following this conclusion, he further elaborated on three other motivators: a company can promote the accumulation of culture and values, cultivate human resources in the art profession like a reservoir, and push artists to confront issues of the survival of an artist in the society.

Why is there a gap between Rothkopf’s impression of “trafficking” and Murakami’s intention “to obey the requirements of law and regulations”? What exactly is the thing that the art world feels unacceptable but both Murakami and Xu Zhen consider “reasonable” in adopting the company model?

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109 Takashi Murakami. Email interview with Qianfan Gu, see Appendix B.

110 Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Appendix A.
Chapter 3

Three Theoretical Aspects

As discussed in Chapter Two, the discrepancy between Rothkopf’s assessment that these artists are “trafficking” and Murakami’s intention “to obey the requirements of law and regulations” reveals two conceptions at odd with each other on the relationship between business and art.

Forming a company is the typical way to create a business in a capitalist society. In the art world, however, the artist-company is looked down upon as an undesirable, disreputable entity. For many, the introduction of a commercial model into art means that art has lost its authenticity and that artist-company owners have surrendered to capitalism, or even worse, worship money. Does it naturally follow, however, that seeking a high revenue in an art business results lower quality art? Furthermore, are we judging art based on ethical or artistic criteria? To answer these questions, we need to fully understand the legitimacy of the artist-company’s existence.

This study will elaborate on three theories that explore the claim that the artist-company is an inevitable outcome of our current capitalist society. The artist-company reflects many characteristics of the current era, and although not the most ideal mode for artistic creation, it has made a positive impact on the art world.
3.1 The Artist-Company as a “Privatization” of the Means of Production in a Post-Communist Context

Both Murakami and Xu Zhen’s justifications for choosing the company format seem reasonable within the premises of their own artistic programs. Such premises include wanting to cooperate with others, obey law and regulations, foster cultural values, cultivate human resources in the art profession, and push artists to confront the problem of the survival of an artist. Their reasons demonstrate two facts about today’s art: firstly, art can function outside of museums and exhibitions. Art “can be interpreted as a sum of works circulating on the art market,”\(^{111}\) thus an artist needs to deal with practical issues when circulating works. They need to cooperate with other people, hire assistants, take commissions, sell works, pay taxes, and gain public attention. Secondly, contemporary artists are no different than the Old Masters in terms of facing these practical issues. The Old Masters worked closely with their art patrons in order to secure these requirements for success; however, it seems that these requirements are more complicated for contemporary artists. The workload is so heavy that artists cannot finish works independently; they need a team, an organization, or a company to execute their projects. In short, while artists need to be involved in the process, the workload of the process of bringing the works to the market is too great for them to work alone. For this reason, the formation of an artist-company is justified.

This explanation begs the question: why is the workload so heavy as compared to that of the Old Masters? What is the difference between today’s artists and the Old Masters who, with the sponsorship from patrons, spent years on completing a masterpiece? In addition, who are the current art sponsors? In his article “Art and Money,” Boris Groys tackles the question, “Who can financially support advanced art under the conditions of modern capitalism?” to which he answers, the financial elite. In applying Greenberg’s analysis to the current cultural context, Groys states, “the modern elite must erase any distinction of taste and create an illusion of aesthetic solidarity with the masses” and “the contemporary elites collect precisely the art that they assume to be spectacular enough to attract the masses.” Groys points out that art is now a mass culture practice, and artists today need to belong to a majority of the population. He explains, “This is precisely what contemporary professional artists do — they investigate and manifest mass art production.” The taste and preferences of the masses determine the taste and preferences of the financial elites, and thus indirectly and partly determine the preferences of successful artists’ works. This might explain that those who own artist-companies (e.g., Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, and Xu Zhen) are artists who create works that explore topics of mass culture. For instance, Koons presents pornography in “Made in Heaven” and kitsch in “Banality,” while Murakami’s focus on otaku culture has a broad base in Japan, and Xu Zhen repeatedly uses the format

112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
of supermarket. Their works are inspired by the public, and in turn meet mass
culture’s taste and preferences.

In his analysis of Xu Zhen’s solo exhibition at the Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2014, Chinese philosopher and art critic Lu Xinghua
mentioned that the show cost 12 million RMB (approximately two million USD) to
produce. Lu comments that “Behind the exhibition is a total of six sponsors: some
collectors, some galleries, and some individuals […] The composition is like the
partnership of an investment team in Hollywood.”115 Lu further describes this type
of investment as the “Coca-Cola Effect” of art, “We all know that [Warren] Buffett
loves the Coca-Cola stock. He holds long-term investments in it, and he drinks Cola
every day, as if it is his ‘faith.’ He believes that the only a product like Cola could be
the most powerful and long-lasting one in the capital matrix.”116 Lu’s analogizing Xu
Zhen’s artwork to Coca-Cola shares a similar logic to Groys’ analysis that financial
elites who value the masses’ preferences are also those who pay for contemporary
art.

The requirements of the financial elite and the mass public justify the amount
of money needed to produce some artworks. Successful contemporary artists share
this justification. Capital is needed to produce art that can trigger the public’s
interest and attract the media’s focus. This fact provides objective reasoning for the

MadeIn Company Production>” In Lu’s personal weibo account and discussions on Art-Ba-
Ba, January 23rd 2014. Accessed from: http://www.art-ba-
ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=78048&forumId=8
陆兴华, 《甩了？有了！——评 2014 尤伦斯开年大展<徐震：没顶公司出品>》，陆兴华
个人微博长文，2014年1月23日。

116 Ibid.
phenomenon of artist-company. In addition, subjective concerns of the artists also play a pivotal role in this sort of art production. If we would agree, as Groys suggests, that “art can be seen in the context of the art market and every work of art can function as a commodity,”\textsuperscript{117} then we could take one step further to rethink the role of artists. Rather than the stereotypical impression of artists as noble and disinterested creator, artists, in the context of art market, can be considered as laborers in art production, and the artist-company a privatization of the means of production by the art laborers. This type of reasoning is particularly applicable when interpreting Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company’s impact in contemporary China, because it has not been easy for contemporary Chinese artists to get appreciations from the Chinese society.

China’s handling of Ai Weiwei can be said to be representative of the position of contemporary art in China. Ai was banned from international travel and certain of his independent film festivals and art activities were cancelled or shut down. Ai, like many avant-garde pioneers, faces questions and scrutiny from the state. Seen as a reactionary ideologue that endangers the mainstream values, Ai has struggled to garner support from the authorities for quite some time. Moreover, the public rarely has a keen awareness of contemporary art projects and trends. In the process of building up a socialist and later a communist society, China built a system of mainstream values that are largely incompatible with contemporary art, namely holding a critical argument against authority. In simple terms, contemporary art is in an awkward position in China. It might be cutting-edge, and yet it has always

\textsuperscript{117} Groys. “Art and Money.” 2011.
stayed at the edge of the society because the government eschews it and the public
does not understand it. Combined, these two factors lead to lack of general support.

Xu Zhen is acutely aware of this difficulty. He has mentioned, “the model of
the company is a certain ‘limited democracy’” several times in interviews. The
term “a certain limited democracy” reveals some of the political ideas implied by his
adoption of the company format. Firstly, Chinese society may equate contemporary
art with heretical ideology. Xu Zhen addresses this issue by emphasizing the close
relationship between artistic creation and economic production in a company. His
explanation relegates art to an industry and a production method rather than a
threatening ideology. By making this connection, Xu Zhen smears protective paint
over contemporary art while positively responding to China’s demands for
economic development that have been emphasized since the Reform and Openness
measures of 1978.

Secondly, most collective forms of organization have difficulty practicing
democracy in any manner. For example, the China Artists Association established in
1949 identifies itself as “a professional group of people led by the Chinese
Communist Party and composed of artists from the nation wide. It is the bridge and
link between the Party, the government and the art circle.” This association and
most other art organizations in China are under the leadership of the government.
Xu Zhen’s idea of an artist-company makes him more of an entrepreneur than an
artist. He is not, and does not need to be, involved in any official art organizations.

119 Introduction of the China Artists Association, accessed from:
http://www.caanet.org.cn/AboutCAA/jianjie.aspx
Moreover, he emphasizes the business logic and the spirit of cooperation so as to mitigate the political factors in China. Xu Zhen’s “limited democracy” suggests a compromised approach under China’s political and social circumstances.

Applying Groys’ examination of the private ownership of Russian art production to Xu Zhen and MadeIn Company reveals more of Xu Zhen’s possible intentions.

Firstly, Groys states “the abolition of private ownership of the means of production [...] as the crucial prerequisite to building first a Socialist and later a Communist society” eventually led to “the reintroduction of private property [as] an equally crucial prerequisite for putting an end to the Communist experiment.”

The privatization of production is a “reintroduction” rather than a brand new invention; and as Groys states, “privatization proves to be just as much an artificial political construct as nationalization had been. The same state that had once nationalized in order to build up Communism is now privatizing in order to build up capitalism.” For Groys, privatization is first and foremost a political tool adopted by the authority to transform socialism and communism back into capitalism; thus, such privatization has “its fatal dependence on the state.” The twisted relationship between private ownership as a means of production and the state described by Groys is consistent with what Xu Zhen has called “limited democracy.”

The artist-company’s existence depends largely on the state’s permission and

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121 Ibid. 166.

122 Ibid. 166.
encouragement of small and medium-sized private enterprises. Furthermore, “limited democracy” is manifested clearly in Xu Zhen’s company itself, “...we don’t want to be a group; since groups are supposed to discuss the consequences of democracy, but that’s not what we are after for. For art, I think, is absolute in the end. Art is very subjective. For example, I am the boss of MadeIn, which means I get to decide things.” Xu Zhen, as the boss of his own company, is the absolute authority in MadeIn Company. His team works together to produce art but it seems that eventually this work culminates in building Xu Zhen’s reputation. Critics might hold a negative opinion towards this aim; however, this “limited democracy” is a conscious and practical choice made by the artist, reflecting the contradictions of China’s political reality. By reintroducing privatization into Chinese contemporary art, Xu Zhen proved the feasibility of this practice but also called to attention the limitations of the practice by naming it a “limited democracy.”

Secondly, according to Groys, appropriation, which “function[s] as the leading artistic method in the context of international contemporary art,” is actually a type of privatization. He then makes a comparison between the appropriation of Western art in postmodernism and the appropriation of the post-Communist (Russian) art saying that the former “appropriate[s] various historical styles, religious or ideological symbols, mass-produced commodities, widespread advertising, but also the works of certain famous artists” while the latter “by

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123 Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Appendix A.
125 Ibid. 167-68.
contrast, appropriates from the enormous store of images, symbols, and texts that no longer belong to anyone.”126 Examining Xu Zhen’s two-decades-long career, we also see this pattern of appropriation. Taking the establishment of MadeIn Company in 2009 as the dividing line between the two phases of his practice, it is clear that prior to 2009, Xu Zhen’s art appropriated characteristics of Western postmodern art: *Untitled-Dinosaur* (2007) directly responded to Hirst’s oeuvre and used the visual framework of Carter’s *The Starving of Sudan* (2008). After 2009, Xu Zhen/MadeIn Company’s Middle East project (2009) and the *Physique of Consciousness* (2011), in particular, reflect the post-Communist art practice of appropriating images and symbols that no longer belong to anyone. This transition was precisely driven by Xu Zhen’s reintroduction of the privatization of art production. Although not a Russian artist, Xu Zhen’s recent practice in China is very much in line with the art of post-Communism as described by Groys.

Thirdly, Groys further elaborates two different attitudes held by Western postmodern and post-Communist art, “Western postmodern art, which reflects on this infinity and at the same time savors it, sometimes wants to appear combative, sometimes cynical, but in any case it wants to be critical. Post-Communist art, by contrast, proves to be deeply anchored in the Communist idyll—it privatizes and expands this idyll rather than renouncing it.”127 According to Groys, post-Communist art is “not critical or radical enough” because “it pursues the utopian

126 Ibid. 168.
127 Ibid. 169.
logic of inclusion, not the realist logic of exclusion, struggle, and criticism.”\(^{128}\) A typical example of this type of “inclusion” is the depiction of poverty in works of art by post-Communist artists, “because poverty unites whereas wealth divides.”\(^{129}\) Madeln Company’s “Prey Series” (2011) aptly reflects Groys’ perspective. In this series, Madeln Company photographed scenes of real people living at the poverty level in China and then painted these images in classical oil painting form with high-end frames. These paintings were later hanged on white gallery walls with prices only accessible to the wealthy. Through this series, Xu Zhen “unites whereas wealth divides.”

In summary, Xu Zhen reintroduced privatization as a means of production into his art practice; therefore, he can be considered a post-Communist artist who reflects the political and social realities of China. In this sense, the lack of criticality in his art should be understood as a mode of “inclusion” with post-Communism features.

3.2 The Always Paradoxical Conception of “Art Autonomy” and the “Institutional Critique Art”

Taking into consideration post-Communist appropriation in understanding Xu Zhen highlights the artist’s particularity as a Chinese contemporary artist. Yet, the artist-company is only a Chinese phenomenon. Studying Xu Zhen’s work, we observe the universal significance of this phenomenon as well as the relevance of

\(^{128}\) Ibid. 169.

\(^{129}\) Ibid. 170.
examining whether the artist-company offers the artist more freedom and control over his or her work.

The German critic, Peter Bürger, has discussed the concept of “art autonomy” several times. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, he points out that “the autonomy of art is a category of bourgeois society that both reveals and obscures an actual historical development.”¹³⁰ For Bürger, “autonomy” is a unique conception born in bourgeois society with inherent contradictories. Bürger quotes Berthold Hinz’s ideas about the genesis of the category “autonomy” as his starting point for further analysis, “The reason that [artist’s] product could acquire importance as something special, ‘autonomous,’ seems to lie in the continuation of the handicraft mode of production after the historical division of labor had set in.”¹³¹ Here, the phrase “handicraft mode of production” is worthy of discussion. For both Hinz and Bürger, mechanical modes of production brought on by the Industrial Revolution gradually dominated all types of industries, and only art retained the handicraft mode of production, thus “autonomy” resided in such handicraftship. However, references to Duchamp’s “ready-made” and factory-made sculptural elements have consistently emerged through the 20th Century questioning the validity of such distinctions. As a result, the handicraft mode of production is no longer a necessity adopted by artists. It is plausible that artists abandoning the “handicraft mode of production” have helped the artist-company format’s shaping.


¹³¹ Ibid. 36.
Although Bürger’s argument is based on concepts that no longer belong solely to contemporary art, his analysis of the paradoxical aspects of the conception of “autonomy” is still instructive. Referencing Schiller’s point of view, Bürger sharply points out that:

On the one hand, art is called upon to be the alternative to the real world, which it can be only if set up in total opposition to that world; on the other, it is precisely this isolation that puts art in danger of becoming “empty play.” In other words, the opposition to life-praxis is the condition enabling art to perform its critical function, even as that condition prevents the critique from having any practical consequences.¹³²

In Bürger’s opinion, the legitimacy of art’s criticality exists in its position of being an alternative option for the rest of the world. Art can criticize, but generally, is not an agent of change. Bürger explains, “it affirms the possibility of its realization, without being able to prove it rigorously.”¹³³ This kind of autonomy keeps art in a small vacuum separate from the rest of the society; the critiques and alternative possibilities suggested by avant-garde art in bourgeois society do not really have the opportunity for realization. The artist’s autonomy is a castle in the air. However, both Murakami and Xu Zhen are well aware that their goal is not just to make their art an “empty play” or an alternative option to the real world. For instance, Murakami explains,

My ultimate dream is to become a person like Sen no Rikyū (千利休), the master of chanoyu (茶道, way of tea), who developed tea into a form of art. When he first initiated the concept of chanoyu, he was a businessman, a

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¹³³ Ibid. 8.
trafficker of artworks but also weapons, and he was involved in politics as well. What I followed were the guidelines behind his actions.¹³⁴

Murakami admires how Sen no Rikyū turned drinking tea into a form of high art, and he thinks that being a businessman helped the master to expand the influence of chanoyu. Xu Zhen’s response is similar,

[Is it possible for art to realize a kind of utilization on the level of ideas and thoughts? To make a blunt metaphor, art is a thing like falling in love. You don’t really have to have a relationship, but most people still choose to. It’s quite the same. I mean... it might not be absolutely necessary theoretically. But you do think about it probably everyday. For us, this is the thing that needs to thought about. [...]]

Tesla is making plans to land on Mars after twenty or thirty years. And in our case, we may think what kind of sculpture or public art does a city in Mars need at when that happens? [...] for me, this is art. It is a kind of consciousness, and it is one of the necessary things.¹³⁵

Murakami and Xu Zhen want to change the world through art. In their utopian imaginations, contemporary art is a form of culture, ideology, or even a behavior, like drinking tea and falling in love. They consider social intervention as an important element in their art, thus the best way to realize intervention is to act in practical ways in the real world. This perspective explains why the two artists not only own their artist-companies, but also create works that use the supermarket as a form; their ambition is to position art into a more ordinary context.

Many critics argue that producing this sort of art puts too much emphasis on securing capital from and catering to the preferences of the elite class. However, as Groys suggests, the preferences of elites are often synonymous with those of the

¹³⁴ Takashi Murakami. E-mail interview with Qianfan Gu, Appendix B.

¹³⁵ Xu Zhen, conversation with Qianfan Gu, Appendix A.
mass public. Moreover, just as “art autonomy” is a contradictory concept, the seemingly capital-favored format of the artist-company does not deprive the artists of freedom. On the contrary, an artist-company’s revenues allow for greater autonomy, which can protect their artistic integrity and help them realize more art projects. Xu Zhen summarizes the advantages of this methodology, “It gradually became a habit: you cook your own food, build your own house, and get a car when you need to go out [...] The good thing is being really independent and self-reliant; for instance, I do not attend seminars, nor do I go to over-exposed publicity and promotional activities [...] The good thing of this working pattern is freedom.”

Objectively speaking, money is a double-edged sword. Many critics fret that capital, and often fame and fortune, can become too strong a drive for the artists. However, money also enables an artist’s economic independence and gives them the ability to complete more works.

Bürger also suggests that “The concept of autonomy may, for some artists, be associated with the idea of independence from society, but as we have seen in Schiller’s theory, the concept functions institutionally to mean emancipation from immediate demands for social application [...]” In simple terms, Bürger points out that the concept of autonomy functions institutionally so that it does not need immediate social application. In other words, the institution can fully guarantee “art autonomy,” both the concept’s dignity (ensuring the artist has control over the work) creations) and its limitation (the relative lack of consequences of artistic criticality).

\[136\] Ibid.

Bürger’s point of view makes it necessary to introduce the institutional definition of art first brought up by George Dickie in the 1970s. According to Dickie, arthood is a status conferred by the institutions of art world; and in this sense, the art world is “an established practice.” This practice is a sequence of interlocking concepts: an art world with an established framework can decide which piece of work is considered art and who is an artist; and an artist’s autonomy is precisely decided by the institutions of the art world. This sounds a bit like a desperate nightmare; only those who are accepted by the art world are considered artists, but art requires creative thinking and actions that might not be easily accepted by an established art world. The biggest contradiction exists between artistic creativity and the established framework.

This contradiction seems to be the source of inspiration for Institutional Critique art that originated in the 1960s. In 1970, Michael Asher created a piece that opened the gallery of Pomona College Museum of Art to the surrounding streets. He removed the gallery doors, forcing the entire space to remain public, day and night, rather than to the restricted gallery hours. Following suit, also in 1970, Hans Haacke set up two transparent voting boxes in The Museum of Modern Art in New York; he asked the visitors to respond to a yes-or-no question related to Nelson Rockefeller, the Republican governor of New York and a MoMA trustee. In 1989, Andrea Fraser gave a performative lecture and tour at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Acting as a docent, she articulated “the unspoken class privilege that underpins American art

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museums that are invested in a Neo-Classical ideology imported from Europe.” In 1992, the African-American artist Fred Wilson curated an exhibition at the Maryland Historical Society in which he rearranged the exhibited artworks to comment on racial and class prejudices reflected in the museum’s collection. For example, he placed slave manacles alongside luxury silverwares as a way to question the stereotypical narratives presented by museums.

These examples reflect some of the characteristics of Institutional Critique art. The works comment on art galleries and museums, from the fixed presentation of time and space to the hidden political standpoint of a museum, often influenced by trustees and its unspoken class privilege that presents biased narratives that neglect certain human experiences. In short, Institutional Critique art criticizes the established framework of the art world.

For some, Institutional Critique art, especially when the genre first appeared, is a puncture point that breaks up the established framework of the current art world. However, just like the paradoxical concept of “art autonomy,” artists and scholars have found the limitations of the art practice. Dutch researcher, Pascal Gielen, summarized the two waves of Institutional Critique art as such:

During the first wave of institutional critique in the 1970s, artists such as Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers seemed to be gasping for breath. They literally wanted to break open the museum in the name of imagination and democracy. Individual freedom and creativity were pitted against a bourgeois morality and the canon of art history. The second generation, from the 1990s, which included protagonists such as Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser, became mired in a wider institutional art field, as described by the cultural sociologist Pierre 139

Bourdieu, among others. Within this field, artists cannot escape the power game and find themselves caught in a Weberian iron cage.\textsuperscript{140}

According to Gielen, the first wave of Institutional Critique art, primarily represented by Michael Asher and Hans Haacke, was a simple attempt born out of individual freedom and creativity. The second wave, represented by Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson, totally failed to win over the power game of the real world. Part of the reason for the failure, in Gielen’s opinion, is “caused by the very ambivalent attitude of artists towards their own institutions.”\textsuperscript{141} More fundamentally, however, Gielen argues that “critique of the institution is only possible thanks to the shelter of that same institution and the values it represents.”\textsuperscript{142} In fact, Institutional Critique artists also agree with this failure. In 2005, Andrea Fraser stated, “Nearly forty years after their first appearance, the practice now associated with ‘institutional critique’ have for many come to seem, well, institutionalized.”\textsuperscript{143} This trend of institutionalization is actually inevitable because Institutional Critique art, no matter how radical and powerful at first, once accepted by the art world will gradually become a part of the established framework that it once criticized.

Xu Zhen’s choices reflect an understanding of this trend, and a desire to eschew it. His debut activity was participating in the 1\textsuperscript{st} International Fax Art


\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.

Exhibition, but not as an artist who had been formally invited. By faking a fax and secretly breaking into the exhibition, he not only questioned the concept of negotiating between an original and a fake but also criticized the institution by commenting on the closure of such exhibitions. However, this piece might be Xu Zhen’s first and only Institutional Critique artwork. It seems that Xu Zhen has long foreseen the inevitable failure of Institutional Critique art because he no longer continues this practice, but has gone to the other pole of the path. He does not require the art world with its established frameworks. Rather, he sets up his own frameworks.

3.3 The Value of Referencing the Model of Exodus

Xu Zhen did not continue Institutional Critique art and neither did he remain obedient to any art institutions; instead, he set up an artist-company, a new form of art institution. His choice fit well into the “tertium datur” a concept discussed by the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, that references the legendary story of the Jewish Exodus. In his Anthropology and Theory of Institutions, Virno explains,

Rather than submitting to the pharaoh or rising up against his rule, the Jews took advantage of the principle of the tertium datur, seizing a further and unprecedented possibility: to abandon the ‘house of slavery and iniquitous labour’. So they venture into a no man’s land, where they experience unheard-of forms of self-government.144

Before completing an analysis of tertium datur, the definition of “the institution” should be clarified. For Gielen and political theorist Isabell Lorey, an institution is a

certain kind of verticality existing in our horizontal social and political reality; Lorey puts it metaphorically, “horizontality itself does not exist without aspects of verticality.” This is a fact-based dialectical point of view, and both theorists emphasize that the institution functions as a bridge linking the ideal and the real, “institutions have always played a crucial role in mediating between the real world and the imagined world.” Yet, Virno suggests a more fundamental understanding of the institution, starting from the understanding of language, “language is an institution. It is [...] a ‘pure institution’, the matrix and yardstick for all the others.” From this understanding of language, Virno confers an institutional tonality to our social and political system. He believes that “Language is the institution that makes possible all the other institutions: fashion, marriage, law, the State - the list goes on.” In a later analysis, Virno asserts that “language contains no positive reality, endowed with autonomous consistency, but only differences and differences among differences. Each term is defined by its ‘non-coincidence with the rest,’ which is to say by its opposition or heterogeneity with respect to all the other terms.” In other words, languages are used to present the difference of things, and similarly, institutions exist because they represent something different.

Taking one step further into this understanding of language and institution’s


146 Ibid. 13.


148 Ibid.

149 Ibid.
heterogeneous essence, Virno describes two subdivided cases of heterogeneity: the “semantic defect,” and inversely, the “semantic excess,”

The I is reabsorbed into a chaotic world whose parts, far from still constituting discrete units, merge into an unstable and enveloping continuum. In the first case [i.e. “semantic defect”] we are dealing with acts without power; in the second [i.e. “semantic excess”], with power without acts […] 150

That is to say, the “semantic defect” is type of institution that takes action without power; while the “semantic excess” is the type of that owns power but takes no action. More specifically, in the case of Institutional Critique art, artists such as Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, and Fred Wilson, are at the polarity of the “semantic defect” because they take radical and critical actions without real power in hand. Alternatively, the established frameworks of art institutions worthy of critique are the “semantic excess;” they own real power but take no action.

Virno explains that a binary opposition may exist within the essence of the institution. Such essence is coherent with heterogeneity, or “negation,” embedded in language, “Negation, which is to say what language does, must be understood above all as something that language is.” 151 Here, additional examination of the concept of “negation” is needed. At least two types of desperate negation exist. One type is the failure of negation, elaborated upon by Jean Baudrillard,

Negation as such / That which does not succeed in negating itself as such / The proletariat which did not succeed in negating itself as such...

It is the clearest evidence that a century and a half of history since Marx can give us. The proletariat did not succeed in negating itself as a class, and through this operation abolishing class society. Perhaps this is because the

150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
proletariat was not a class, contrary to what has been said - which would explain, then, the difficulty of a negation of itself as such. In this case one should say that only the bourgeoisie was truly a class, and therefore that only the bourgeoisie was able to negate itself as such (a scabrous but nevertheless interesting hypothesis). This the bourgeoisie did indeed accomplish. The bourgeoisie negated itself as such (and capital along with it), engendering a classless society.\footnote{Jean Baudrillard. “Revolution and the End of Utopia.” In Jean Baudrillard: The Disappearance of Art and Politics, edited by William Stearns and William Chaloupka, 236-37. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992.}

Using the assertion that “the proletariat did not succeed in negating itself,” Baudrillard points out a certain type of failed negation. The other type of negation, a successful but simultaneously ironic, is presented in Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of Hegel’s ideas,

Hegel was aware of this destructive vocation of irony. Analyzing Schlegel’s theories in the Aesthetics, he saw in the omnilateral annihilation of all determinacy and all content and extreme reference of the subject to himself, that is, an extreme way of giving oneself self-consciousness. Yet he also understood that irony, on its destructive course, could not stop with the external world and was bound fatally to turn its negation against itself. The artistic subject, who has elevated himself like a god over his own creation, now accomplishes his negative work, destroying the very principle of negation: he is a god that destroys itself. To define this destiny of irony, Hegel uses the expression ein Nichtiges, ein sich Vernichtendes, “a self-annihilating nothing.” At the extreme limit of art’s destiny, when all the gods fade in the twilight of art’s laughter, art is only a negation that negates itself, a self-annihilating nothing.\footnote{Giorgio Agamben. “A Self-Annihilating Nothing.” In The Man Without Content, 56. California: Stanford University Press, 1999.}

Either having failed in negation such as the proletariat or succeeded in negation but facing “a self-annihilating nothing,” philosophers have suggested dead ends along the path of “negation” for us. It is here that we can consider another option, “tertium datur.” One can engage an “Exodus” and set up a self-adaptive form of institution.
The establishment of the artist-company is such a choice. Through setting up their own companies, artists can achieve self-financing, which puts them on more equal footing in negotiations with galleries and museums. In fact, both Murakami and Xu Zhen sidestep the mire of the gallery altogether by setting up their own galleries. Simply put, the purpose of the institution is to make artwork visible for an audience. With the help of galleries and exhibitions presented by museums, artists’ creations become accessible to viewers. The artist-company as an independent form of an institution fosters this accessibility more directly and easily. No longer subjects to be ruled by the old system, nor a heroic but tragic rebel against the old system, the “tertium datur” enables the works to operate in a new type of system seeking for partnership with the old on an equal footing.

One last aspect to consider on this topic: if widespread capitalism in the world is inevitable, what possible impact with this have on the art phenomenon discussed here? Virno points out the value of introducing katechon into the spectrum of institution. This Greek word, “employed by the apostle Paul in the second letter to the Thessalonians and then repeatedly recovered by conservative doctrines means ‘that which restrains’, a force that always yet again defers the ultimate destruction.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps katechon can be employed as a solution,

The katechon does not vanquish evil, but limits it and parries its strikes each and every time. It does not save from destruction, but rather holds it back, and in order to hold it back, it conforms to the innumerable occasions in which it may manifest itself. It resists the pressure of chaos by adhering to it, just like the concave adheres to the convex.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Virno. “Anthropology and Theory of Institutions.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.
The *katechon* does not fall into either states of binary opposition; it is a state of continuous oscillation due to “the double bind to which the *katechon* is subject: if it restrains evil, the final defeat of evil is hindered; if aggressiveness is limited, the ultimate annihilation of aggressiveness is forestalled.”\(^{156}\) Because of the double bind, the *katechon* is self-contradictory; yet, its antinomy is remarkably productive since “both evil triumphant and the total victory over evil imply [the] end” while the *katechon* “oscillate[s] between the negative and the positive, without ever expunging the negative.”\(^{157}\) In Virno’s view, the *katechon* “carries out a contingent and very precise task” and it “is the institution best suited to the permanent state of exception.”\(^{158}\) In other words, when the idea of the *katechon* is applied to the current capitalist reality, the following outcome may happen: we will not eliminate capitalism, nor will we be conquered or confined by it. In the case of the artist-company, the *katechon* may be the commercial logic and rules implied in the format. Xu Zhen’s *Supermarket*, for example, is based on the commercial form and rules of supermarkets, yet Xu Zhen could still communicate his views and sharp commentary on the commercial format. Here, the *katechon* is the thing that positions the work between art and business. It is the substance that has been extracted from its original packaging; it makes a deal between the work’s artist and viewers. In other words, the *katechon* is an in-between in the middle of two extreme poles.

\(^{156}\) Ibid.

\(^{157}\) Ibid.

\(^{158}\) Ibid.
In closing, Virno asserts, “I need to be granted a certain degree of autonomy in order to be exploited.”¹⁵⁹ This study takes the converse to be true: we need to tolerate a certain degree of exploitation to maintain autonomy. Precisely because of dynamic, the artist-company is a type of institution with the idea of the *katechon* embedded in it. In order to secure autonomy, artists need to tolerate a certain degree of exploitation, and similarly, artists must learn to work with capital in the form of artist-company.

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Conclusion

Xu Zhen and his Madeln Company is a telling case study of the contemporary phenomenon of “the artist-company”. Like most artist-companies, Madeln ensures that their art creations can be financially sustainable and effective by adopting the business model of corporation. It is because of the sustainability and effectiveness that the artist-company becomes popular among successful contemporary artists. As discussed in Chapter Three, the existence of the artist-company phenomenon is reasonable in at least three aspects: it is a practical way of privatization that benefit the artists, which is meaningful in a society like China where Socialism and Capitalism are developed with the nation’s historical characteristics; it is an updated reflection of the “art autonomy” and the Institutional Critique art; and referencing the model of Exodus, it suggests a third option beyond the dual relationship of being either critical or obedient to our current political, social, and economical circumstances.

However, we should also keep in mind a dialectical perspective: On one side, we shall not propose the assertive judgment (money = bad / no money = good) in understanding the relationship between art and money since the profit-driven artist-company can truly help artists with their creations. On the other side, this business model is only a methodology, it cannot guarantee that art produced by artist-companies are artistically sound.

Unlike other artist-companies, Madeln Company has its own uniqueness. As mentioned in Chapter Two, it is not a collective art workshop like Andy Warhol’s
Factory; it is not about personal reputation like Jeff Koons’ self-branding studio; it does not only look for acceptance from the West like Takashi Murakami. In short, MadeIn is not just a catalyst for art production; it is a self-reflective art project at large. As shown in Chapter One, MadeIn’s “Arrogance” Set (2015) is a piece of artwork that embodies the artist-company model of art creations.

Xu Zhen’s MadeIn Company is a multi-functional art institution rather than an art studio. Together with the projects, it manifests positive characteristics of the artist-company and it suggests that this new type of art institution is a viable alternative in the art world. Meanwhile, MadeIn Company is still under developments; some questions regarding the artist-company require our long lasting attention in the near future: if widespread capitalism in the art world is inevitable, what are the repercussions? Does this model require artists to collude with the capital to be successful? Do we have better options of art production in the context of the capital society and the art market?
Appendix A
- Interview with Xu Zhen

Conducted by the author in November 2015 in Beijing, for Esquire China Magazine [published in the magazine’s Dec. 2015 issue, original title: “From Eating An Apple To Changing the Nutrition Structure of Apples”, edited article title: “Xu Zhen: Artist is Company”]

Qianfan Gu(QG): I feel that it is a habitual thing for you to work in an institutional way, for instances, from the early Biz Art Center, your participation in Art-Ba-Ba, to the establishment of MadeIn Company, and also MadeIn Gallery and PIMO art festival...etc. Quite different from other independent artists, why would you pay so much attention on this institutional pattern of co-operating with other people?

Xu Zhen(XZ): Actually the reasons are complicated. This might be relevant to everyone’s unique experiences of growing up. When I first entered into the art circle, just the same as many 18 or 19 years old young artists, I could find no opportunities at the beginning. I was even a bit more special in my case, because I was not from any academies of fine arts, I graduated from Shanghai Art and Design Vocational College (上海工艺美院), a school focusing on design but not really about art. I think graduates from fine art academies might have a kind of superiority, a bit like “gangsters” or “maffia”. Such feelings as “I am one of them”, “we are the better ones”... I did not have any of these. However, I was not being jealous as well. It was just the quite realistic situation back then.

Secondly, I live in Shanghai, very different from the “artists flock” atmosphere in Beijing. So we Shanghai artists’ communications are relatively normal. When I was 20 years old, I met a bunch of artists that were similar to myself. We all had the same feeling that there did not exist any opportunities or activities. We decided not to wait but start our own things. That was how we started. When I look back, I felt that almost all the things during that time were mainly “invented” by myself. Group exhibitions, solo shows... all done by myself. It gradually became a habit: you cook your own food, build your own house, and get a car when you need to go out... This has both good and bad aspects. The good thing is being really independent and self-reliance; for instances, I do not attend seminars, nor do I go to over-exposed publicity and promotion activities, or some collective events. It was not because of issues of offending others or not. That was never the point in my case. The reason is that I did most of the things myself, why would I give way to do the things that I dislike. Art is nothing but get some things done happily with others. The good thing of this working pattern is freedom... Perhaps a lot of artists have their confusions or whatever; for me, I don’t have such things. So you would not feel that I was being too emotional or whatever. The bad thing is that others may treat you as a group and play your own games. But if you take a deep look, from 1997 until now, we are always expanding and changing. So I don’t feel oursevles being closed. Quite
contrary, we are pretty open. The art circle is constituted of many small sub-circles. If you consider us one of the small sub-circles, and if you compare us with the other ones, you will definitely feel us being the most open one.

Back to the point of setting up institutions, it is precisely because of the independency. For example, the promotions, we felt we could do it ourselves, so we did; the same with planning exhibitions, a more regular thing. When we first started Biz Art Center, there was nothing in Shanghai at that time. We have a dozen of museums in the city now, but no art institutions back then. So we were like, okay, how about we make one. It had been really really busy. Sometimes we did about thirty different activities a month, concerts, exhibitions, poetry readings, dancing shows...etc., almost everything, and almost one activity everyday. We were the only art institution so we did what we could to include all things together. Biz Art was an opportunity for me to learn from artists from various background and types. And during the Biz Art time, I felt one thing quite obvious, that is art and the art circle are two things. In art, you can do whatever you want, but once it comes to dissemination and communication, art becomes another thing, a thing that is even parallel to art. From today's perspectives, it is similar to the ideas of thinking on Internet, that is to say, publicity and promotion has already become an independent media itself.

That is how we start from Biz Art, to Art-Ba-Ba website, and to MadeIn and PIMO... among many other collaborate projects. There were sayings talking about us as a kind of artists' group. We are not, and we don't want to be a group; since groups are supposed to discuss the consequences of democracy, but that's not what we are after for. For art, I think, is absolute in the end. Art is very subjective. For example, I am the boss of MadeIn, which means I get to decide things. If you have ever seen some astonishing artworks, you would have realized that these things are ultimately absolute. Art is absolute for 99%.

QF: Well, institutions could have so many types and forms, why company? By using the form of company, does it also mean that you run this institution according to the logics of a company, for instances, it needs expansion, divisions of labor, profiting goals...etc.?

XZ: I think the form of company is very reasonable. Because the cultivation of artists is not...... Okay, we might ask what are you going to do to open up a company? Actually, from our point of view, this company today could set up a kind of platform. We need it to be creative, capable of producing art, we also need lots of things around art works, i.e. promotion, image shaping, media, academic evaluations, critiques...and so on. To be frank, what you are doing is to push out a set of values. But it is not an easy thing to make clear-cut definitions of these contemporary art’s values. If it is an auto company like BMW, it might be very simple to conclude their values. But in contemporary art, its values are very hard to define. This also suggests that it needs to be in movements to find out and accumulate things. Culture is a thing that needs accumulations itself. Secondly, in fact we Chinese contemporary art
today is facing an extremely difficult problem, that is the brain-drain. Basically, we don’t have even enough brains. Let’s put aside the problem of artists, we are lack of curators, administrators, gallerists, auctioneers, critics… almost all kinds of brains. To fractionize the art profession, we need to establish some regulations, and then keep continuous improvements based on a healthy foundation. For instance, today’s Chinese art critics do not do well in having conversations with international critics and scholars. We won’t discuss about whether it is necessary to conduct such conversations. We are only saying that most critics have poor English. They can’t even achieve the status of information asymmetry… To be honest, I am only in charge of art creations, but I feel myself much better in gaining the latest info. Why is that? Because the creation of art doesn’t require too specific languages. At least, I keep myself synchronize with the latest trends and news everyday. We are not arguing whether synchronization is a good thing or not. You kind of have to keep sync so as to understand how to battle. We are facing severe lack of talents. It is a scary thing. After five years, you probably will find out that, oh fuck, nothing changes. When I look back now, for art critics, there has only come out 3 or 4 people since five years ago. That’s it, that’s the case. It’s not that we have a hundred critics and they are the top ones. They are the only ones… no one else.

QG: So you feel that the form of company could be a secure to avoid loss of talents in the art profession?

XZ: Yes, company is like a reservoir, and it has ins and outs. Also, company must make money. It is a very realistic issue. It’s the same that an artist needs to survive, this is a very realistic problem as well. One good thing about company is that, it makes you facing these things without escaping, it forces you to include such questions into one of the questions in your art creation, rather than just separate an artist’s life off from his/her art. For me this is a way of thinking.

QG: How about future plans for MadeIn? I personally feel that if we are considering in the sense of companies, art is a bit behind of the current era… I mean, we have lots of excellent examples of well-developed companies, such as Apple, which is also a realization of creative cultural productions. So for MadeIn, will you take these examples as the future orientation?

XZ: For me, I think first of all, culture is not products, but it can exist in the form of products. We could separate these two things theoretically, but only through tangible and practical works could we visualize their differences. I think culture is a thing that much bigger than all these stuff. My major was actually advertising. For me, company like Apple is trying to tell you about its image, a bit like the formula 1+1=2. But the problem is that art is much more complicated than that. Even while we talk about Pop Art, like Andy Warhol or Jeff Koons, they might seem to be rather
simple. But still, art would not be so utilitarian. So from our perspectives, we might have some fantasies: because today’s art has changed a lot, and since the Internet has disrupted people’s life; then, is it possible for art to realize a kind of utilization on the level of ideas and thoughts? To make a blunt metaphor, art is a thing like falling in love. You don’t really have to have a relationship, but most people still choose to. It’s quite the same. I mean... it might not be absolutely necessary theoretically. But you do think about it probably everyday. For us, this is the thing that needs to think about. It is also our main task to list out such things and to figure out whether these things could be done under today’s circumstances. Some artists might be the type of Wang Xizhi (王羲之), his calligraphy shows out the high level of his thinking. However, it is the integrity that matters for us. Actually lots of categories are all included: you might be a social observer, and put lots of metaphysical thoughts into your works...etc. Lots of things are based on certain propositions.

Tesla is making plans of getting on Mars after twenty or thirty years. And in our case, we may think what kind of sculpture or public art does a city in Mars need at that time? Or let’s make another instance: it’s like even in the era of the Nazi, people still need beautiful things. We read from books that during war time some people walk the way to death with their heads up high -- for me, this is art. It is a kind of consciousness, and it is one of the necessary things. Back to what we were just talking about, I do think the Internet is a good thing, it actually has changed people’s consciousness.

QG: Some scholar writes in his essay that “the idea of a company run by artists as a self-protecting answer”. I guess what he means is that, the company is like a protective umbrella. Because of this company-umbrella, artists could break down the continuity between his/her artworks, using the brand as a recognizable sign instead of the contents within artworks. Thus, the artists could be liberated from the continuity of their artworks.

XZ: I agree with his saying, but only with the opposite preconditions. I mean, it seems that artists should keep their art styles unified. In other words, certain artists should always focus on some certain topics or maintain some beliefs. For me, I don't think so. Let’s do not talk about this from moral points of view. It could be a problem of flavor. For some people, their favorite might be hot pot; but sorry, I like everything, all kinds of food. This is also reasonable.

I guess I know who the writer is. He comes from Europe. But the situations here in China are so evidently different from Europe. For example, I would say that globalization is more evident in China than European and American countries: there are more Apple users here than there. I meet curators from Northern Europe quite a lot, and they are using cellphones from the already-fallen Nokia. They don’t need to watch their phones all the time including every mealtime. I remember we discussed such things quite a lot before the explosion of information. We considered it was
impolite and rude and got controlled by information to always keep checking your phones. But it turns out to be just fine. Perhaps the old generation would always thinks the younger one to be problematic, but actually it’s not always the case.

QG: Yes, that’s quite right. My confusion might be that if branding has taken the place of the contents of artworks and becomes the recognizable symbol; then how should we treat something that is already a symbol… I mean, right now, MadeIn Company has become a brand, but still people would relate it to your name directly...

XZ: Yes, yes... so what’s wrong about it? I mean, all the people are trying to jump to the future, to question that after 50 years, when you, when Xu Zhen has already dead, will this brand keep living... My point is, this is not an urgent question, because you do not foresee what will happen in 50 years. According to the developing speed of today's technology, it's like one week now covers almost a century in old times.... Umn... sometimes when I watch my daughter playing video games on smart phones...

QG: How old is she?

XZ: I have two daughters; one is six, the other four... I mean, when they play games or watch animation movies on screens... You could feel that their understanding of the sense of rhythm has changed largely. For instances, we watched Star Wars series, and then Cars, and Ice Age... I once showed them the first movie of Ice Age series; but they can’t finish watching it... the story telling is too slow for them, not attractive at all...

This is a big problem. We should not overestimate ourselves and look down upon the following generation. I feel I am completely capable of catching up the young people. Perhaps, the things we felt classical won’t be so at all in the future. On the contrary, however, the things they don’t feel right doesn’t mean that we should not keep doing. We need to look at each other as references, and always keep looking... Well, actually, one does not need to insist on doing so many things, but, you need to insist on some things; and I am searching for these things. For some people, a certain kinds of things are not proper to do... I think such kind of thinking is being naïve. Anyway, I have been making plans for ten or twenty years later, so I don’t feel 50 years would be a big problem.

MadeIn is controversial only because it exists in the art circle. If we are discussing outside the art profession, then the same questions won’t be issues anymore. Usually, the boss of a company would crave for getting famous, because it saves fees on advertising. Only in the art world do people feel awkward about opening up companies. They would also question you, why connect yourself to the company... I
feel it’s a meaningless question. Why don’t you ask such a question to the CEO of Google that why does he connect himself to Google? This has been the way of thinking in the art world; for example, the criteria of having “academic values”. If connecting to one’s own company means less “academic value”; then such an academic criteria is only an anthropological classification.

QG: Let’s get back to the point of being “self-protecting”. I have read quite some negative questionings and critiques on MadeIn. Do you usually read such comments?

XZ: I do. My main job is keep receiving various types of information everyday. But actually I don’t feel such comments being helpful. I think before Internet, both in China and in Western countries, the information you receive equals to those you send out. I mean, if I’m having an exhibition, I need to promote it, so I would give out a certain amount of information; and it equals to the information I get from others despite of their standpoints, whether they like or dislike my exhibition. I don’t feel any difference today. If we are having more feedbacks, it only means that we are sending out that amount of information. The proportion didn’t change.

QG: When I see the picture of your artwork shown in the Long Museum’s solo exhibition -- the set boxes of artworks, I read it as a self-critique on being an artist. While I find that some other people don’t agree at all; for them, it is just a pure action of peddling, selling things. I am really curious that do you have the standpoint of being critical in your artworks now? Do you want to do criticizing?

XZ: This is how I feel: to put it nicely, I think people maybe don’t need criticizing. It is a very paradoxical thing. Let me make an example for you. If we have enough food and clothing, spiritually fulfilled, and also living in an environment without the air pollution... what would you criticize about? We could only say that the reality cannot make a perfect life for you. You might criticize being in a small room. The feeling of being uncomfortable is the start of being critical. So theoretically, I feel that criticizing is not a necessary thing; but in fact, it exists everywhere. It is the same that we think people’s spirits and those values are eternal theoretically; but in fact, the flesh vanishes in seconds. Theoretically, either opening up a company or not is fine; but in fact you are opening up a company as using a tool, you would think about what to do with the tool all the time. These things are actually the same. The critical I am talking about is actually bigger than what you have said about being critical.

QG: Then, does this mean it is not a question for you? Do you feel the ideal situation would be getting rid of being critical?
XZ: No. What I mean is that don’t do criticizing deliberately. As a human being, your normal expression is okay, and even when you meet some hindering things and obstructions, and out of various reasons that you are not willing to express and feel afraid or whatever... these are all okay, no problem. My point is, you need to be down to earth while also stay with spiritual pursuits. This is easier said than done, and also sounds like some chicken soup for the soul; but I feel very rare people could do this.

QG: I am very curious about your attitude towards being critical. Because for example Jeff Koons, you could hardly tell whether he is being like that, or he actually keeps the standpoint of being critical... but well, he thinks that being critical is already outdated, not powerful anymore.

XZ: Let me put this in another way: being critical is a kind of relationship. If there's only me and nothing else, there would be no criticizing at all. When you are doing criticizing or cursing others, you started a relationship. Thus, being critical is not eternal, it’s momentary. I don’t feel being critical is good or bad. There exists no such question. What Jeff Koons said is that “if you are critical, you’re already out of the game.” I won’t say it will be a thing as “out of the game”, but once you want to be critical, you are actually entering into another room from the current one. There might be a relationship combining your confidence and diffidence. What I’m about to say might sound like some Oriental philosophies... that is to say: I don’t care. Just pick up the things you need, and that’s enough. Of course things will happen during the picking up process, whether you are being adoptive or being critical... It doesn’t really matter; all is fine. For me, all these things are acceptable.

I did have confusions for a while. Recently, friends coming back from New York and showed me pictures taken in MoMA and PS1. I suddenly felt that, oh dear, China’s contemporary art has put too much emphasis on being critical for all these thirty years. I mean, the critical aspects on society in art are being too strong. Art is being too close to politics. In those galleries, images are horses, women reclining in sofas, or nudes, flowers... but here in China, always images of guns or other bloody things, all these kinds of symbols. I am not saying it is a bad thing. I am saying that the function art plays in our society is obvious in such kind of art works.

QG: I’m wondering whether it’s because the life in western societies doesn’t need too much questionings...

XZ: That’s why I feel the so-called globalization is such a bullshit thing. We are getting towards a wrong direction.

QG: Why? You don’t agree with the “One World” idea?
XZ: Not really. I feel that... the forms of culture are not a relationship of services. Like, would you think the McDonald’s fast-food culture is a kind of culture? Yes, it is. But then, how did such kind of culture been produced. If you live in the U.S., you would know that McDonald’s is just one of a hundred burger brands. Then why is it the only representative of the burger culture in China? I bet a bunch of other brands have better tasty burgers than McDonald’s... So it is actually a frame formed with the aid of commercial business. The frame makes us feel similar with each other: we are globalized; you drink Starbucks and I do too; you use iPhone and I do too; you have Apple computers and I do too... these things are making people the same. If you cut off the connections to the outside, shut the door and then take a real look at these things; they are all American things. I mean, probably, after 50 years, these would all be Chinese things, then what we would have is Chinese-lization, the globalization would be Chinese-lization. So actually, consuming is becoming a kind of carrier, like books carrying ideas and ideologies. Not to mention that the internet has already changed the structure of consuming, it makes consuming into a thing of feeling. Therefore, I feel that art is being too occlusive... not art, the art industry I mean, the art circle is being too occlusive.

QG: I have some related confusions. I am wondering whether it is because the core of art itself is quite empty; thus it needs things from outside, like cross-disciplinary or cross-professional things... art kinds of need things from other fields. When you say PS1, I remember going to see the exhibition by a German artist who makes references to the style and visual languages of those science and technology fairs. I could feel what he is trying to say on one side, but on the other side, I don’t feel he offers any nutritious elements to art.

XZ: Yes, what you mentioned is the problem of today’s Post-Internet generation. I had quite some conversations with young artists. I feel that this whole generation is synchronizing. It happens from my generation, but not that obvious. When it comes to Post-Internet artworks, if we cover the wall texts and information of artists, we would feel that all these works seem to be done by the same person. I think the similarity among Post-Internet generation has things to do with your shared habits of consuming Starbucks. Actually we had analysis on this phenomenon. Why would this happen? I think it’s because conceptual art has ended. All explorations within material have been done, which makes Post-Internet a way out. But what actually is the main structure of Post-Internet? It is not the way of being exploited. I mean, like sculptures, ok, Rodin’s sculptures are expressions of the beauty of human, he was being realistic, vivid, and powerful; when it comes to Henry Moore, it is all about shaping, a simple and elegant type of shapes... Then, what about the Internet? Post-Internet is actually the manifestation of itself.

I feel the same with you. Astonished by the first one, then cool with the second one, then feel confused with the others: they are all being so alien-looking, and also they
all look like the same with each other. It is a problem. To be frankly, lots of image-based online forums, BBS and blogs have amazing things, much more interesting than what we have in contemporary art. They don’t bother calling themselves art at all, they are just being very original and creative.

Some people are against Post-Internet art right now, feeling it’s being shallow and easily-done... But this is exactly the same with what we have when conceptual art appears...

QG: We have been a bit off the topic; the question was about being critical... it is quite obvious that your early works have stronger sense of being critical...

XZ: Right, early works are critical in a more evident way. But such kind of criticizes are almost gone now.

QG: I’ve seen your new work done for Parkett Magazine “The Tribal Chief’s New Clothes (2015)”... When I saw it, plus the issue of being critical or not, I thought about “The Emperor’s New Clothes” from Andersen’s fairy tales. The little kid pointed out that the emperor had no clothes on; but it’s like the kid becomes a new emperor after he grows up, and then is it true that he could not keep criticizing?

XZ: Yes, that is indeed. Therefore a company could solve such a problem. Like what I’ve just said. Company could exclude you from such a game. As a matter of fact, the issue of being critical... let’s see Jeff Koons, his big thing was put on the top of buildings in Manhattan, isn’t that an irony? Isn’t this a critique? Right? I mean, when you walk on a street... well, this metaphor might be troublesome for you to write into your article... let’s assume you see a mosque, a Christian church, and a Buddhism temple on the street, what would you feel? When each of the three things exists on its own, it is also being a threat to the others. It’s the same here: you could be very religious, and don’t do any criticizing. However, someone’s existence itself includes a certain kind of irony within it. For some artists, they won’t do things that they feel not coherent with their works. But let’s see Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol, they are being coherent in another way, they have included the ideas about the society into their behaviors. They are magnifying things, not saying that “come on here”, “come into my paintings”, but leading us to see the social contexts of their artworks. They invited you to the places where their works exist, not into their works directly, unlike most of the artists who would say “come into my world”... so from this point of view, the critical thing we are talking about is not simply one artist criticize one phenomenon... not like that at all.

QG: I have a not that practical question for you. Since I see the works by Wang Sishun (王思顺), the fire of truth... he is an artist of MadeIn Gallery, also there is this
“True Image Series” you created around 2010. I feel it’s not that often to see words like “truth” or “true” in artwork titles nowadays; perhaps not a popular question recently. Do you believe in truth?

XZ: This is what I think about truth: it might not exist at all, but still you have to go after for it. Such truths are actually a kind of consciousness of your own. I think it relates to your stability as a creator. From the perspective of the normal public, the desire to pursue a better life would be a kind of truth as well. In Wang Sishun’s case, this kind of art project might fall into the stereotype of conceptual art; for example, through narratives about the earth and leaves to express some certain relationships. We had lots of discussions by then. My suggestion for him was that, try to look at your idea from a future perspective, imagine how your work’s gonna look like after a hundred years later. So you have to kind of magnify your ideas, otherwise you would feel nothing has been said when looking back after a century. Actually artists should have great noses. It’s like you could smell something that others can’t. When you smell it, your consciousness is already there. In Wang Sishun’s project, I told him that when you smell it, and your consciousness also gets there, how about move yourself to that place as well? Just go there, literally go there. You really have to have a sense of your body. By doing so, you could then let others understand how big this thing is; it is something metaphysical and something deserves to be insisted on...

In fact, lots of people would feel surprised after talking with us. We own a company, that’s true, but also, we are real artists. We would never deny artworks that might be hard to sell. Even when I am telling you some specific artworks being really hard to sell, I am not underestimating it at all.

Some of the artists of our gallery feel headache when they see me, coz I would like... for instance, if the artist paints, I would say to him, paint on large canvases. Why? Because the large ones are sickly awesome. However, actually large canvases are hard to sell. Then why would Xu Zhen ask us to paint large ones? My answer is really simple: it is the same as brand shaping... I mean, I’m not denying the value of paintings in small sizes; they could definitely be classical as well... it's just, in our current era, larger canvases are more likely to lead to classical works. Larger canvases are better for your expressions, and more likely to become masterpiece. That’s reason one. Secondly, only through practices in large canvases could you get back into works of regular sizes. So you could grasp the ability to control and transform in various visual languages. We are discussing this kind of issue in a very academic perspective. Also, from the perspective of branding, it is the same: only when masterpiece appears would you be recognizable for everyone. Are we talking in the sense of commercial business? I don’t think so. Even it is the commercial senses; I feel it’s a healthy type of logics of business, and nothing wrong with using healthy commercial logics. So now quite some people would say, oh fuck, you guys are not commercial at all, you guys are being very academic. Yes, we have more specific requirements on the quality control.
QG: What is the general working process of MadeIn? Are you in charge of creative ideas, and then other people keep working on the ideas? Or is it in a subdivision way, like someone focuses on some specific things...?

XZ: Umn... yes, kind of like that, that’s why I feel quite tired. It’s like, I mean, for MadeIn Company, my most direct partner is... probably you also know... Vigy... not a little girl anymore, since we’ve been cooperated for about 16 or 17 years. We do have several departments. But actually almost 2/3 of the staffs need to stay in flow along with various projects. We have quite some people doing promotion-related jobs currently. Why is that? Because I suggest, just as what you have also mentioned before, and I also suggest this to lots of other artists, that you need to keep in mind the idea of doing promotions about your work while you are actually doing the work... It could be even considered as “pyramid sales”. I mean, since you have already chosen to do an art project, you should not wait until the exhibition day to let other people know about it. You should always keep the idea in your brain, tell people what is going on when you are out... like, you need to explain to others, Wang Sishun’s work has things to do with a kind of combat among ideologies...

QG: So, is the whole company functioning in ways like some large enterprises?

XZ: Yes, kind of... but not that large. We have several departments; but all these departments are tightly connected to the whole company... it’s like MadeIn is a group company, with branches of gallery, the brand of Xu Zhen, the media...actually we are about to start new moves in the media part, try to reschedule Art-Ba-Ba... But we are running all these branches as a whole. They have really tight connections with each other. Also, the hierarchy in the company is really simple and flexible, only about two or three levels, and that’s it.

QG: Got you. I’ve read a piece on you comparing you to the dystopia concept of George Orwell, who wrote sentences like “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.” For the author, your behaviors have similarity with such a kind of “dystopia”. I feel really curious whether you consider this as the author’s own opinion, or you would agree with such a “dystopia” as well.

XZ: I feel that such narratives being a bit too artsy-fartsy. I mean, what he said is just that those opposite things do exist together... real things are always... it’s like most of the real things are really cruel. No matter your values, your success as an artist, or failure, or just your existence... all these things are pretty cruel. The reality is that, because of you someone could not exist... or the opposite, because of him, you could not exist... real things are cruel, not artsy.
QG: I feel, if we look back at your career, I mean you are probably in the mid-career phase right now...

XZ: (laugh)... ha, I'm not that old... it's been just less than two decades...

QG: I mean, I feel you have gone through three stages during this two decades: at first, challenge and question things quite a lot; then, you have some critical reactions spontaneously; and now, you start your own construction...

XZ: Yes, yes, it's all been very natural. These stages mean that our method of working is like keep practicing while looking for directions at the same time. So the feedbacks from each other are really rapid and timely.

At first, you start art creations within the closest distance from yourself, like your skin, the sense of touching between people... all these sensitive feelings; and then you gradually moved to the social relationships, the ideologies; and perhaps right now, it developed into a more inclusive thing, like what is the way of existence for culture... It is quite true about these three stages. And now is time to put together all these things.

QG: Would you ever have the feeling that some certain artworks need to be adjusted, if you could redo it now?

XZ: That’s for sure. Adjustments are always needed. All art are based on errors. Even if you have the chance to redo something now, you would still regret couple of years later. It has always been the case.

QG: So what kind of future plans do you have recently?

XZ: We do have fresh plans about every two years, to make progress towards a more evident and advanced direction. But I can’t tell you now. These are the company’s confidential things. But you'll see, and in very near future.

QG: Sure. I feel you are always “online”. I mean it seems that you are more of an artist relying on instincts, especially look back at your early works. But when I meet you today, you're actually always in the status to learn more, to gain more information...
XZ: Yes, that's true. I mean, I do not take airplanes, and I don’t travel around. Like you’ve mentioned, I don’t need to know that much things, but I have a roughly clear picture in mind. Obtaining information is for a kind of knowledge stock. I would say that I know more that those artists who fly all the time. Actually, in the era of the Internet, physical experiences have already become a waste, at least for me. Because the art creations and the art direction of our company have lots of practical aspects, they are meant to be in use. What does this mean? In other words, we have precise purposes. Even you are aiming at some kind of sickly awesomeness; that is exactly a purpose. Thus, my job is to transform all these things, the knowledge I have into a kind of purpose. Say, like the gallery will put an artist’s show, my job is to talk to the artist, not to praise him or whatever, but try to help him clear out the ideas he has, and set up a new purpose for him… all these things are being really practical works. So I don’t feel the need to travel around outside at all.

QG: What do you read mainly, besides art information?

XZ: I do not mainly read art things, because I already knew. I am surrounded with artists and curators. We communicate through wechat everyday… so perhaps, the amount of art information occupies 10 percent of my whole readings. I like reading things on businesses, or on the Internet, and many various others… But I don’t read long articles, I have dyslexia in a certain degree. If I find some articles on philosophy interesting, I would go ask a professor who majors in philosophy, and go like, could you please conclude this article into couple of short sentences? And that’s it.

Actually our job is a kind of knowledge handling. It is like the ready-mades. You just need to know general things about a culture, like ancient Egyptian culture is like that… then when you really need to go deeper one day, just go do the research by then… As long as we have the Internet, you don’t really need to know things. You just need to keep in mind your direction. Books are not supposed to be read in old ways, I think. Tables of contents are enough. Like Žižek, you just need to know the book titles of his… okay, he has this famous concept about a desert or whatever, I think Wang Jianwei (汪建伟) has used such concept… then alright, you got the clues, and that’s quite enough… you could rest your brain, vacate it for something else…

QG: What kind of things, then?

XZ: Creativity.

QG: Do you mean that knowing too much would be a burden and limitation?
XZ: That’s why I don’t need to know that much. I would go to the bookstore, and read the titles of about three hundred books, and that’s enough.

QG: Then... do you mainly get attracted to interesting things?

XZ: Yes, interesting things, things that could intrigue you. These things differ a lot according to different ages. Everyone loves porn website at their twenties and thirties. But not anymore now, not capable of... you would transfer your energy into something else.

QG: So, you want to keep curious?

XZ: That’s right. Because your daily routine is very stable, it’s a professional thing. Just like the runner Liu Xiang (刘翔), he gets training everyday. The speed record he broke in competition was not the first time he ran that fast. It’s for sure that he runs at this speed quite often during training.

QG: Do you care about what definitions people would make of you? Artist? Or entrepreneur?

XZ: I don’t really care at all. Some one or something would make a final definition of you in the end. Like, the history. But from today’s viewpoints, they think you are an artist, or they question that you don’t look like an artist... all these things don’t really matter. It doesn’t matter whether you look like an artist or not, it also doesn’t matter whether you are an artist or not. Everyone is just doing things.

QG: You’re being quite generous on many things; but does there exist anything that you feel not capable of making any sacrifices?

XZ: Sure. Actually colleges and staffs feel afraid to see me. Because there are lots of things you cannot sacrifice, too many things actually. Let me give you an example. They were doing some guiding signs yesterday, and they sent me pictures after finishing the design. And I asked them to redo it. I said: remember, our company stays here in China, so Chinese has to be in front of English. They were saying, but the design wouldn’t turn out to be so good in that case. I said, don’t negotiate such things with me, it’s your job to make it look nice, but you need to remember the principles. I mean these details are the things you need to really think about.
QG: Let me ask my final question. Since we are doing this interview for *Esquire China*, a mass media magazine focusing on pop culture, but not art actually... So, is the public also your targeting audience?

XZ: I think yes, they are. But our current efforts are actually useless. Because the whole art industry is still keep a far distance from the public. Our discussions and chats today may have no use at all. I remember last year I did an interview for GQ Magazine. They set up some large advertising boards with my photo on it on the streets. One day, I passed by coincidently, and then I was having a casual chat with a friend under that big board, without any passengers recognizing me at all... (laugh). But still, of course, every little attempt deserves trying, right?
Appendix B
-- Email Interview with Takashi Murakami

Conducted by the author in December 2015, for Bazaar Art Magazine [published in the magazine’s Jan. 2016 issue, article title: “Takashi Murakami: The Endless Battle for Art”]

Qianfan Gu (QG): Could you please let us know your habitual schedule of art creating process? Since you have quite some assistants and staff, what is the division of labor in general?

Takashi Murakami (TM): I started making animations and films since 2011; so these things have also become a part of my work. I could not separate them from my other things. Even now, I am not a person good at making divisions of various kinds of labor efficiently.

QG: Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. was established in 2001, about 15 years ago. What made you want to have a company at the first place? What are the merits and drawbacks in having a company involved in art making?

TM: In Japan, if you want to cooperate with a group of people, you need to obey the requirements of law and regulations; thus I chose to establish a company instead of studio. The merit is that I could work on multiple projects simultaneously. However, on the other hand, each one of my employees has very different ideas; we need to communicate with each other everyday to come up solutions for things.

QG: The book you wrote in 2006 “芸術起業論 (On the Entrepreneurship of Art)” has published and got a large range of readers in China. It is a quite sincere book that being so honest and sharp about considering art as a practical business; but it also got criticized that some would feel it being too utilitarian. Why would you be willing to share these ideas and experiences in your writing? Would you feel offensive if someone call you a businessman rather than an artist?

TM: My ultimate dream is to become a person like Sen no Rikyū (千利休), the master of chanoyu (茶道, way of tea), who developed tea into a form of art. When he first initiated the concept of chanoyu, he was a businessman, a trafficker of artworks but also weapons, and he was involved in politics as well. What I followed were the guidelines behind his actions. I don’t care how people talk about me; for me, the most important thing is to keep going on my beliefs of art firmly, until the day I die.
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(quotations appeared in this essay are translated by Qianfan Gu)

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[Figure 2] “Arrogance” Set, artworks set, 290 x 150 x 324 cm, Edition of 3+2 AP, Produced by MadeIn Company, 2015. Image from MadeIn Company.
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* Biz Art Center (1998-2009)
* SG (2008-09)
* Art-Ba-Ba (2006-present)
* M. Gallery (2014-present)

* SG stands for Shopping Gallery;
* M. Gallery stands for MadeIn Gallery.

[Figure 3] The chronological tabulation of Xu Zhen’s career and his art institutions from 1996 to 2016.