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Big Sister Enterprise: Just Be There

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Big Sister Enterprise: Just Be There

By Wai Ying Zhao

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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December 17, 2018
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I. Big Sister Enterprise and Its Origin

Wai Ying Zhao, an artist and curator, instituted an American company named Big Sister Enterprise in 2018. BSE is a Delaware registered LLC (limited liability company) that imitates new businesses implemented in order to foster a community of emerging artists with the intent of exhibiting and promoting their works. Zhao’s initiative stems from the awareness that many artists are struggling to continue their studio practices because of unstable income or being overworked in jobs such as art handling, gallery sitting and bartending. Through openings and events held in spaces in both New York and Shenzhen, she aims to create a community where emerging artists, patrons, mentors and art supporters can gather to nurture potential business relationships, as well as foster cultural dialogues between the United States and China.

II. Here and There, New York and Shenzhen

For the inaugural BSE exhibition, Zhao decided to reach out to artists, institutes, and collectives with which she has already developed close rapport. Personal relationships are essential in order to be a part of the BSE community as it is fundamental that trust be established between the company and its members. With this in mind, Zhao invited the institute Shu Xin Tang run by the artist Chan Lok San in Shenzhen, the collective StudioUNI run by the artist Derrick Qi Wang in Shenzhen, the institute Petit Musée run by the artist Stella Diming Zhong in New York City, and the artist Michelle O’Connell based in New York City, to participate in the group exhibition facilitated by BSE and presented at Zhao’s Hunter College thesis exhibition. The inaugural event will take place at the 205 Hudson Gallery from December 15 to January
BSE’s inaugural exhibition, titled *Here and There, New York and Shenzhen*, will establish a presence of Shu Xin Tang, StudioUNI, Petit Musée, and Michelle O’Connell as BSE’s first community members. Shu Xin Tang and Petit Musée are offering collections on loan, while StudioUNI and Michelle O’Connell are presenting special projects. The exhibition itself will consist of three distinct spaces that a young female guide will tour the visitors through. Each part will be revealed to the viewers one after the other.

Entering in groups no larger than eight, the first part of the exhibition is a video projected in an isolated dark room. The video is a one-minute commercial welcoming the visitors to the event. The room functions similarly to a waiting room as visitors sit in office-like chairs and wait for the video to end. Upon completion, the visitors will be guided through a blackout curtain and into the second room where they will find the works of Shu Xin Tang, StudioUNI, Petit Musée, and Michelle O’Connell (to be described below). The female guide, using a headset and holding a tour guide flag, will then proceed to describe each work, noting key elements in the artworks as well as giving insight into the artists’ intent.

Lastly, visitors will be guided into the final room where a ceremonial event will conclude the tour and the visitors will be able to enjoy refreshments and view a second commercial video. The video will explain BSE’s vision as a cultural institution and include information on how artists can apply to the BSE Residency program. A presentation of surveys BSE sent out to current MFA students at Hunter College about
their working conditions will also be on display, as well as a catalogue of the exhibition. Visitors can then decide to exit the event or stay to socialize and network. As soon as the guide has dismissed herself to initiate the next tour, the visitors are free to walk back and forth between the exhibition and the refreshment room.

III. Inaugural Message

The works included in the BSE inaugural exhibition have been selectively curated based on the personal relationships of the artists and institutions as well as for their ties to both Shenzhen and New York.

![Image of a film still provided by StudioUNI at Big Sister Enterprise](image)

The Shenzhen-based film collective StudioUNI presents two twelve-hour videos consisting of twelve unedited scenes shot at different locations around Shenzhen from 10pm to 9am. Each segment brings actual moments of Chinese life to the gallery space as if viewers in New York are experiencing Shenzhen in real-time.

Across the room is Michelle O’Connell’s installation composed of videos projected onto paintings and screens. Her videos are a combination of recorded footage of her
paintings' movements and video she filmed from her travels.

Presented next to the special projects are works on loan to BSE. Hanging on the wall are eight calligraphy works by the artist Chan Lok San, also known by her Buddhist name Changfu, from the Shenzhen-based Chinese traditional art studio Shu Xin Tang. Next to the eight calligraphy works is a glass vitrine that consists of approximately one-hundred miniature objects that the artist Stella Diming Zhong collected since 2014. Zhong named the glass vitrine Petit Musée which houses her collections of tiny objects.

As if StudioUNI's images are initiating a video chat between New York City and Shenzhen, Michelle O'Connell's work fluctuates somewhere in between both locales, presenting her lived experience and movements in both places. Shu Xin Tang's traditional Chinese paintings and O'Connell's expressionist paintings on canvas represent artistic styles from both east and west, though upon closer investigation, they respectively reveal influences from the time Shu Xin Tang spent in New York and O'Connell spent in China. As each work presents a collection of moments, the objects in Petite Musée are a collection of objects that have been carefully curated and put on display as if to present the wide array of places that they originated from. Travel and collecting become a thread that connect the works, while presenting multiple viewpoints of both New York and Shenzhen.

IV. Humor as Critique

The exhibition itself has multiple functions. It is intended as a group exhibition funded by BSE, while at the same time it uses the platform of Zhao's thesis exhibition to point to the absurd nature of how the art world works. The very fact that Zhao chooses
not to present her thesis exhibition under her own name, but rather under the guise of a commercial enterprise, points to her desire to resist the myth of the genius artist and advocate for a setting that emphasizes the importance of the group. The enterprise is at times as unclear as it is straightforward, trying to mirror and mock how the art world manages to be the enemy of the artist but at the same time her or his lifeline.

BSE’s logo, a black line drawing of a young girl with her hands under her armpits, portrays the stereotypical female gesture of being needy, something women are often blamed as being. Zhao understands that institutions are often the ones being blamed by artists for their own struggles. The image of a demonized woman, who is also an angry big sister who takes care of others, becomes a metaphor for the demonized institution in the art world. Trying to lightheartedly point to artists’ illogical reasoning to blame institutions who often take care of their lifeline, Zhao uses the angry sister as an entry
point to highlight such problem, while at the same time decoding the convention of a traditional institution.

A tour guide is also used within the exhibition structure as a kind of holder of the meaning behind the works. As no captions are presented on the walls near the works in the exhibition, the visitors are expected to stay near the guide, who is a young female, and ask questions in order to obtain more information.

As Andrea Fraser performed a ‘guest’, a ‘volunteer’ and an ‘artist’ at her single channel video work Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk 1989¹, Zhao performs as a ‘guide’, a ‘founder’ of her institution BSE, as well as an ‘artist’. Within the framework of the newly invented company Big Sister Enterprise, Zhao plays the role of the keeper of secrets, as it is often the case when visiting museums and galleries where no information is given about the artworks presented and visitors must seek out staff members or wait for a tour to understand the artist’s intentions. The exhibition guide uses a loud speaker as if she is giving a tour in China. She performs this stereotypical convention also holding a flag in case the visitors detour from the path.

Although Zhao has serious intentions, she uses humor as a tool to draw attention to her criticism of certain aspects of the art world. Visitors in this way can engage in the process of looking more deeply into the layers of interactions as Zhao intended while also laughing along with her.

V. Community as Company

Launching BSE with artists whom Zhao has become close with, Zhao transforms her thesis platform into a group exhibition that emphasizes her belief in accompaniment. As artists’ survival depends on community, resources, and a means of creating artwork, Zhao believes in a sustainable business model, one that allows all community members to profit. Different from a traditional white cube gallery and also from a not-for-profit artist space, BSE aims to provide not only a store front for selling artworks, but also a network of community members and patrons that regularly meet in order to contribute to the success of all within the community.

Andrea Fraser once wrote in *ArtForum*, “No matter how public in placement, immaterial, transitory, relational, everyday, or even invisible, what is announced and perceived as art is always already institutionalized, simply because it exists within the perception of participants in the field of art as art, a perception not necessarily aesthetic but fundamentally social in its determination.” Being keenly aware of the fact that art is already institutionalized, BSE’s mission is to focus on weaving together a platform where the social aspect of the art community can be manifested through a business-like institutional structure. Art cannot exist without a social structure, hence BSE’s slogan “Just Be There” suggests the importance of being present and supporting each other.

Essentially, the goal of BSE is to examine whether or not a healthy community can be built within a company. Artist Xu Zhen founded MadeIn Company to support emerging artists, often ones that he has personal ties and connections to.

“In 2009, Xu Zhen dissolved his art practice into the "contemporary art creation

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2 Fraser, Andrea. “From the critique of institution to an institution of critique”. *ArtForum*. 2005.
company” MadeIn Company. Acting as the group’s CEO, Xu Zhen continues to undertake creative projects, artworks, and exhibitions under this revised mantle. MadeIn encapsulated Xu Zhen’s unique conflation of art practice, curatorial work, and art promotion that has defined his multifarious career in the Shanghai art scene.”

MadeIn company runs MadeIn Gallery and has an exhibition space where the artists regularly exhibit their works. MadeIn Company patented Xu Zhen as a brand, so in effect, Zhen branded and patented himself. Through this process, he is able to separate his work as the facilitator from the work that comes out of his studio which is for sale. He performs multiple roles, the founder of a company, an artist, and a curator embracing each and being straightforward about his roles and intentions.

An artist-run restaurant FOOD led by Gordon Matta-Clark, Caroline Goodden, Tina Girouard, Rachel Lew and Suzy Harris was opened at 127 Prince Street in New York City in 1971 and was a space where artists could go to get support and to be part of a community. Alanna Heiss described FOOD as “the site of a lot of apocryphal stories. He [Matta-Clark] once told me of a sculptor’s dinner – for sculptors by sculptors. All of the utensils were to be screwdrivers, hammers, chisels. I don’t know if it really happened.” All profits went to maintaining the space and paying the artists who worked as cooks and waiters.

Learning from MadeIn Company and FOOD, Zhao understood that in order to


create a community where all members could thrive, an institutional structure must be established. Institutions are virtual entities that can house collective group effort while each single participant is credited properly. Collaborations among individual artists without a framework of institution can become tricky to credit, as the art world loves the image of a single genius artist and often chooses to ignore other contributors to the artist’s project. Institutions functions as a place that can be the façade of which all initiatives can happen and properly credited within.

VI. Conclusion

An interesting problem that is at stake in the contemporary art world is that there seems to be a separation between artists who hold up to building their unique image in the market and those who prioritize making a living using the skills they achieved in the arts. The myth is that an artist normally is not able to do both. This is an issue Zhao intends to tackle through running BSE, which is a community that not only values each artist’s authorship, but also strives to foster business opportunities collectively.

During the process of creating BSE, Zhao found herself switching roles and modes of thinking, playing the persona of officer, business manager, facilitator and curator. The very action of building a company she treats as an experiment, a work of art in itself. Just like how Mike Smith in Mike’s World\(^5\) puts on a suit and purposes his new business plan to the audiences in front of the television as art, Zhao performs the roles of the American art worker. The humor Zhao employs is similar to Smith’s in that they both appropriate existing roles, using conventions as the medium.

As businesswoman, Zhao aims to facilitate events where important people in the art world can socialize and later associate with each other. These events function under BSE even though Zhao, an artist herself, is behind the initiatives.

Another important aspect of BSE is to promote art that reflects a inter-cultural dialogue. The inaugural exhibition reflects this idea by showing artists whose work comes from a mix of Chinese and American cultural lineages. Wanting to promote international understanding within the arts, part of BSE’s mission is to provide access for artists to travel, with plans of launching an artist residency program in Shenzhen, China in 2020. The alternative space will provide working artists with a cultural experience that will expand their concepts and ideas beyond their existing cultural and social circles.

Ultimately, BSE reflects Zhao’s dissatisfaction with the artist’s tendency to look at institutions as the root of their own struggles. She therefore is presenting her own artwork as a collective project that functions within a company in order to support artists and to prove that institutions are an essential structure through which the art community
can exist. Without an organizational structure, there can be no progress. Holding to integrity and the artist-first mission, BSE’s community builds trust and values creativity and innovation.

BSE also maintains an Instagram account. Please follow BSE on Instagram @bigsisterenterprise to stay up-to-date with BSE’s news and events. For further inquiries and information email BSE at bigsister@bigsisterenterprise.com.
Bibliography:


Wai Ying Zhao
Thesis Exhibition
December 15- January 9, 2019

Image List:

1. **Wai Ying Zhao (Big Sister Enterprise)**
   *BSE welcome video, 2018*
   film still
   Dimension variable

2. **Wai Ying Zhao (Big Sister Enterprise)**
   *BSE information video, 2018*
   film still
   Dimension variable

3. **Wai Ying Zhao (Big Sister Enterprise)**
   *Exhibition catalogue front page, 2018*
   8.5 x 5.5 inch, 60 pages
   Dimension variable

4. **Stella Diming Zhong (on loan to Big Sister Enterprise)**
   two sculptures from *Petit Musée, 2014 - 2018*
   Medium variable
   Dimension variable

5. **StudioUNI (special project for Big Sister Enterprise)**
   2 video stills of *Video Chat: Shenzhen and New York, 2018*
   Two 12-hour film
   Dimension variable

6. **Michelle O'Connell (special project for Big Sister Enterprise)**
   *Trial, 2018*
   Video projection, acrylic and enamel on canvas, spandex and wood
   Dimension variable

7. **Chan Lok San (on loan to Big Sister Enterprise)**
   *Calligraphy, 2018*
   10 x 10 inch each
   Dimension variable

8. **Chan Lok San (on loan to Big Sister Enterprise)**
   *Calligraphy on fan, 2018*
   16 x 20 inch each
   Dimension variable
to foster cultural discourses between China and the United States.
New York & Shenzhen
Here & There

December 15, 2018 - January 9, 2019

Shao Xin Tang
StudioUNI
Petit Mûre
Michelle O'Connell

@bigsisenterpris
5.
7.

8.
Installation Views