

Calling for a Process of De-alternativeness: On Artist Initiatives in China

In the first International Artist Initiatives Istanbul Meeting in October 2009, the topic “Alternative to What?” was brought up in the following questions:

What is an “artist initiative”? Is there only one definition of it? Most of the artist initiatives claim to be “alternative.” What are they alternative to? What is their role in society and in the art world?¹

The first question seems to be far too easy to answer since one can quickly locate a satisfactory definition on Wikipedia, which reads as follows: “An artist-run initiative is any project run by visual artists to present theirs' and others' projects. They might approximate a traditional art gallery space in appearance or function, or they may take a markedly different approach, limited only by the artist's understanding of the term.”² As Wikipedia is an open source Web site, this non-canonical public-contributed definition might be dismissed by much of the art world, but it does point out the fundamental characteristics of artist initiatives, which can be summarized as run by artists for themselves or others, with or without a physical space, and consisting of diverse practices. The last phrase in the Wikipedia definition above, “limited only by the artist's understanding of the term,” might appear to be vague and uncommunicative and the question posed in the above quote, “is there only one definition of it?” is perhaps a better way of approaching it. I would agree that in general this definition from Wikipedia could also be applied to the situation in China, where answers to “alternative to what” and “what are the roles of artist initiatives in society and the art world at large” might remain obscure.

The designation “alternative space” or “alternative practice” is commonly used when one talks about artist initiatives or self-organizational practices in China. It conveys at least three layers of meaning. First, the sustainability of initiatives and practices as such is usually in question because of the unavailability of public funding and their supposedly non-profit model. Second, these alternative, small, quasi-institutions are usually located in peripheral areas, either far away from a cultural centre like Beijing or not situated directly within art-clustered or populated areas such as Beijing's 798 Art District. Staying away from the centre is the most accepted symbol that represents “alternative” status, which leads us to the third layer of meaning—that alternative gestures are thus interpreted as acts of

self-alienation or realistic compromise due to the unavailability of capital and resources rather than being independent or micro-political constructions. For most artists or art practitioners in the art system of China, artist initiatives are posited in an illegitimate situation—none of them can be registered as non-profit organizations—and they don't receive enough visibility either physically or discursively, in the minds of many peers they are merely interesting but not influential or indispensable.

The reality is that artist initiatives in China are alternative to everyone: to their direct public, who might be the local residents of the neighborhood and who are generally not familiar with self-organized visual culture projects, or the fame-fetching, market oriented art world, which centers around the symbolic values of the cultural capitals. This creates a conundrum for most artist initiatives—either stop being disconnected from the public and win them over by abandoning legitimation from within the art world, or aim to receive recognition from the art community and ignore communication with the local community. This battle puts the very last question raised at the Istanbul meeting—what is their role in society and in the art world?—in a state of suspension.

The problem with the term “alternative” is that it reaffirms the dichotomy between “the centre” and “the periphery,” a situation that prioritizes artwork that can be visually displayed, represented, and consumed by museums and institutions. Artistic and cultural practices that are not object-based and involve more micro-political participation from their direct audiences—local neighbours and communities for example—are essentially unrepresentable and uncommodifiable, nurturing a sense of dissidence and self-critique within the art ecology and society itself. These kind of practices within China should be understood as an immunity born from within the system and not as an antidote injected from the outside or as exotic ornaments. The question “Alternative to what?” should always be kept in mind as a reminder of resistance and autonomy, but not taken as a restriction on how one should look at, project imaginations about, and construct artistic practices. Instead, substantial issues such as the politics of collectivity, survival strategies, and sustainability, need to be discussed.

How About Sustainability?

To talk about the sustainability of artist initiatives in China, one needs to talk in a realistic manner and even in legal terms. It might be unknown to most that the majority of private art museums in China are registered as “cultural communication companies” in the Bureau of Commerce and Industry. In legal terms, they are companies that are entitled to make profit. There are a few museums and art centres registered as “private non-enterprise entities,” but there are no regulations for art foundations within mainland China. An institution or initiative can register as a non-profit organization, but there is no legal way for it to gain financial support if it does not make any profit itself. Collecting donations privately is illegal, although there are grey zones, as with almost everything else. If the situation with private museums and

mid-scale institutions is already contradictory and difficult, how do artist initiatives, without being able to register legally and having access to public funding get the money to run their spaces or their projects?

Most artist initiatives in China, either space-based or project-based, meet their budget through their founders' own profit-making activities such as teaching, selling their own artwork, writing, or running a more profitable company, in addition to small personal donations or funding from local patrons or foreign foundations. This might not be much different from some of the artist run spaces outside of China, but there is doubt among the general public and even within the art world in China about the very model and principles of "non-profit." It appears to be difficult for Chinese to think of art as something "non-profit," especially when the auction price of a single oil painting can soar into the millions of dollars and artists appear all the time on the red carpet and attending luxurious parties. Besides, does non-profit make any sense in a society of "kleptocracy."³ But one should never forget that capitalist society is exactly where the concept of "non-profit" was created—it's a byproduct of modern civic society. The anguish and confrontation between the people and the government in China that is represented in the Western media mocks the fact that most Chinese expect the government to play a decisive role in their public life and public welfare, and they just don't think it is doing well enough! What is alienating for them is not artist initiatives themselves, but idea of self-organization and a sense of belonging to a smaller unit within society, namely a self-defined community. If art in general is just another aspect of wealthy lifestyles appreciated by the rich and privileged, it is the last thing that the public would like to contribute to.

The sustainability I am talking about here is actually about building up and strengthening a belief in contributing, for free, to others and society, and the urge to diversify practices of cultural production. That is why claiming to be "alternative" might not be that appealing to most; instead, how about replacing "alternative" with "being together" and telling the truth about survival?

The Politics of Collectivity

To put my proposition under the generic slogan of being together might not be productive or inspirational. When one witnesses the widely dispersed interest groups of the apolitical movements in the West and their varied appeals, as well as the parties, gatherings, and free speeches happening on the streets and in the museums worldwide, one cannot stop thinking that "being together" spatially might not create common goals, and we do need some common goals in order to continue being together. Maria Lind summarized some of the related issues for further examination in her essay about collaborative and collective activities: ". . . how people work on a short-term basis, as well as on a long-term basis; how they spread their attention across various subjects, methods, lifestyles, political orientations; how they hope for some kind of emancipation; which obstacles they come across and last but not least, what sort of satisfaction results from working in a group."⁴



In the project *Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art*, curated by Liu Ding, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Su Wei, artist initiatives such as HomeShop in Beijing, and Little Production, run by young artists in Shanghai and Hangzhou, have been introduced under the term “self-practice,” which was defined by the curatorial narrative of *Little Movements* as the “individual,” the modernist unit of autonomy and resistance. From the perspective of these initiatives, to be together is either a voluntary choice or a strategic decision; the politics of collectivity is their everyday reality. Curiously, when speaking with these artists, most of them insist on the temporality of collaboration and emphasized they still work on their own projects most of the time and they highly respect each one’s personal choice. Artist initiatives are collaborative and collective activities by nature, so if artists choose to work together and not alone, and if they choose to situate their projects in the public sphere and not in their own studios, what happens, exactly? Compared with the variety of symposia, conferences, exhibitions, and publications in the last decade that have been produced outside of China, the politics of collectivity remain untouched and even are a taboo in the area of contemporary art in China.

In recent years, collectivity has returned as a discourse together with a fanaticism for Eastern European conceptualism globally. Collectivism used to be an omnipresent word for common life in most former-communist countries, but it also signified a strong suppression of the individual—once the ideological disguise of collectivism gets destroyed, the withdrawal back to the complete and absolute individual became unprecedented. In my personal experience working in self-initiated projects and with artist initiatives, what is at stake in collectivity is a goal of efficiency. The non-hierarchical structure of negotiation within a collective endeavour takes on a lot more than one’s

Museum of Unknown,
Encounter, 2011, installation
view in the exhibition *A
Museum That is Not*. Courtesy
of Guangdong Times Museum.



Participants relax in the courtyard before stretching their vocal chords with experimental improvisationists Phil Minton and Audrey Chen for HomeWorkShop No. 13, 2012. Courtesy of HomeShop, Beijing.

individual ambition, the unceasing process of self-inquiry, and self-reflection, and struggle between the particularities and the common ground is bound to happen, thus a platform can be built for the others and one artist can act as agency for other artists. I collaborated with the artist initiative Museum of Unknown in an exhibition I curated last year titled A Museum That is Not, and the members of the collective individually worked under the same title of Encounter, which was a new commission for the exhibition, while real negotiation happened mostly in the actual display of the objects. To me, as the curator and as an observer of the project, the collective moments of negotiation within the group remained obscure. What process of decision-making actually happened, and what can one learn from it?

Survival Strategies

Survival is usually understood as the struggle between life and death, but it can also be taken as a positive approach in a precarious context. The survival strategies of artist initiatives in China can be categorized as proactive intervention, progressive localization, and self-institutionalization. I will provide a few examples to further illustrate my categorization.

Since June 2010, to protest against the Overseas Chinese Town Holding Company's filling of the East Lake in order to build a real estate project, artists and architects from Wuhan initiated two rounds of projects involving a variety of groups and individuals. The organization took the form of a series of proactive and discrete interventions under the umbrella of Project of Donghu and responded to the local situation with flexibility. Their strategy of interventions could be viewed as a form of civic mobilization, and the slogan "Everyone's East Lake" surely appealed to the nostalgia of retaining natural landscapes for urban dwellers. Resonance with global



Top: Janin Walter + Melanie Humann, Zhong Jialing, *That Obscure Theatre*, 2011. Courtesy of Observation Society, Guangzhou.

Left: He An, *Wind Light as a Thief*, 2011, installation view. Photo: Wang Wei. Courtesy of Arrow Factory, Beijing.



movements that seem apolitical can be found in Project of Donghu's aesthetic and poetic, rather than overtly political, gestures. Regardless of their social aspirations, discussion brought about by these ephemeral interventions and performances, and their eventual impact, remain mostly within the art world.

HomeShop and Arrow Factory in Beijing, and Observation Society in Guangzhou, are among the a few artist initiatives in China that take an approach acknowledging the spatial and everyday circumstances of where they are located. Each have set themselves up in ordinary neighbourhoods where most of the residents have nothing to do with art and might never walk into a museum. Compared with the relational projects of Arrow Factory and the young artist solo exhibition model of Observation Society, HomeShop seems to be the only one that has progressively localized their practice through, for example, their self-printed community newspaper, organic farming, or free weather forecasts—activities that deviate greatly from accepted canonical museum exhibitions. As a result of a relatively conventional exhibition model, Observation Society has gained more visibility and recognition from within the art world than that of HomeShop.

Artists in Shanghai have a prolific history of presenting self-organized exhibitions, and that is why after TOP Building in the Outstanding Park of Shanghai initiated a year-long project, Future Festival, the urgency of self-institutionalization was clearly manifested:

The topic of Future Festival was inspired by French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who said that 'the role of the artist is to prepare for future projects'. This quotation alludes to a certain reversion in contemporary art action, suggesting that participating artists turned from the act of criticizing and making experiences to a new attitude of bidding, gathering, and mingling. During this period, discussions between local artists and a philosophy professor (Lu Xinghua), as well as interviews in artists' studio and exhibitions, will be held. This continuous symposium is more than a simple combination between philosophy and art, the organizers insist on the fact that: it is neither a talk, nor an exhibition, neither an art project, nor one of those academic topics we were used to, an inertia processing in an experienced thinking. It responds to art introspection, surprises, conflicts of opinions, differences, and the unknown. Everyday becomes a festival. It is actually more a final festival, a kind of decisive conviction.⁵

This might be the strongest manifesto I've ever read from an artist initiative in China, but the anonymous and strong-minded organizers remain mysterious; the only person whose name appeared in the whole paragraph took on the role of spokesperson and mentor. The world has been separated into that of



Installation view of Poster Exhibition, 2011. Courtesy of TOP, Shanghai.



the “artists” and that of the “others,” and it calls for a festival consisting only of the former. Most of the organizers of the TOP Building belong to the generation born in the 1970s in China, while an even younger generation of artists might approach the same issue of autonomy through comparatively more moderate propositions. Since the spring of 2012, Hu Yun, Li Mu, and Lu Pingyuan, from Shanghai, have designed and published three issues of *PDF*, an artist journal circulated mainly by e-mail with essays written by the artists themselves and other contributors who pose critical questions to the art institutions and inject new ideas into the art world.

As an institutional practitioner, specifically, a museum curator in China, I think that I can learn a lot from the diverse and vigorous practices of artist initiatives. By collaborating with each other, artists can make different forms of imagination, visibility, and participation possible. Last, but not least, we should perhaps reject the word “alternative” and take each other as equal partners and interlocutors. Artist initiatives should be taken as a necessity within, and even outside of, the art system, and the questions and issues brought up by their practices are far from “alternative”—they are ubiquitous.

Notes

¹ <http://www.artistinitiatives.org/>.

² Wikipedia, “Artist-run initiative,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artist-run_initiative.

³ Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kleptocracy>. Kleptocracy is a form of political and government corruption where the government exists to increase the personal wealth and political power of its officials and the ruling class at the expense of the wider population, often without pretense of honest service.

⁴ Maria Lind, “The Collaborative Turn,” in *Taking The Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, eds. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 17.

⁵ “Future Festival,” <http://www.m50top.com/details.aspx?id=249&key=creative>.