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Art in reality – Beijing 798 Biennale explore a shifting community

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Hu Huishan Memorial, by Liu Shikun

By He Jianwei

The 706 Factory in 798 Art District got a new addition for last Saturday's Biennial: a low-ceilinged shed for Three Gorges resettlers with three single beds and an old wooden door.

"During the past 10 years, more attention has been going to the underprivileged and people left living on the fringes of society. This awareness has imbued the contemporary art scene with a sense of community spirit," Zhu Qi, curator of the first Beijing 798 Biennial, says.

Three Gorges resettlers, casualties of Wenchuan Earthquake, migrant workers and mental patients were the topics of the night. They embody contemporary art's focus on shifting communities.

Contemporary art has achieved great success in the domestic and international markets, but it has become alienated from China's domestic conditions.

But that might be changing.

Over the last few years, the contemporary art scene has developed a strong sense of community awareness.

Many artists join the people abandoned by society to form a relationship with them. “They cause change by influencing, inspiring and mingling with people and communities,” Zhu says.



Mobile Drugstore collects new proposals for healing the mentally ill.

Mobile drugstore

Guo Haiping, a Nanjing artist, made headlines last year when he went to live with committed mental patients for two months to teach them painting. Some patients demonstrated such a talent that “art therapy” became recommended for other mental patients.

At the exhibition, Guo and other two artists showed their newest installation: the Mobile Drugstore. On August 3, Huang Yao, Luo Li and Guo piled into an Iveco bus in Nanjing and headed for the capital by way of Anhui, Shandong, Tianjin and Hebei provinces. At each stop, they collected new proposals for healing the mentally ill.



Mobile Drugstore

“We wanted to learn what people thought and how they dealt with mental problems,” Guo says.

By the time they arrived, they had collected 42 proposals from local artists, including art and literature therapy for manic depressives.

In Bangbu, Anhui Province, Wang Lei, a local artist, highlighted the problems of the “lonely child”: the icon of the one-child generation. He designed a black T-shirt with the characters “lonely cd.” “We discussed the mental problems of the only child, such as loneliness, melancholy and delusion. All of us wore T-shirts to show our concern for the problem,” Guo says.

The bus arrived in Suzhou, Anhui Province, on August 5. There they found many people who had turned to religion to relieve their physical and mental suffering. The city is home to 700 churches and 200,000 Christians.

“The architecture of churches was approved by th local government. Most people who turned to Christianity did so because they had developed some incurable disease,” Guo says.

They also went to hospitals to pick up patients’ prescriptions. In Linyi No. 4 People’s Hostal, they tried to talk with Yang Yongxin, the psychiatrist made infamous for his use of electroshock therapy to “cure” Internet addicts.

While they could not dissuade Yang, they did pass on their art therapy proposals to one of the doctor’s colleagues.



Jin Le, the head of a village, builds family museums in villagers' houses.

From artist to chief

Jin Le, a Gansu sculptor who was involved in the Beijing art scene for several years before going home, was elected as to lead his village. During his tenure of the position, he asked the villagers to build a local contemporary art gallery.

Born in Shijiezi Village in Gansu Province in 1966, Jin was taught by his aunt and finally studied art at the Xi'an Fine Art Institute. In 1998 he came to Beijing and saw many exhibitions. Here he learned about post-modernism, which opened many new doors.

But he also felt an “uncertainty” in the capital. “I have born in a small village, so I still feel like mall worm in the city,” he says.



When he went back during spring festival, he found his village was still remote and small village. To help open it up, he decided to introduce art.

When Ai Weiwei hosted his Fairytale project, during which he invited 1,001 Chinese people to fly to Kassel, Germany to view it in 2006, Jin signed up five of his villagers. It was their first time abroad, and they appeared on German television during their stay.

After they went home, Jin began inviting artists to give exhibitions in the village.

Last year, the villagers selected Jin as their new head, giving him the chance to start his museum project: Each villager's house would be a family museum.

Budget limitations only allowed for the construction of five family museums to show videos and pictures of the village.

In 706 Factory, Jin built a home museum in miniature where which several villagers sat and watched the videos.



Hu Huishan Memorial, by Liu Shikun

Memorial for quake girl

Located in a forest beside 512 Exhibition Hall at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster, Anren, Sichuan Province, Liu Jiakun built a memorial for Hu Huishan, a 15-year-old student at Juyuan Middle School who was buried and killed in the Wenchuan earthquake.

The memorial's shape is based on the makeshift tents used after the quake. The exterior floor is paved with red brick, and the surface is plastered in the same fashion as a countryside house. The interior wall is painted pink – Hu's favorite color-and full of artcl to recall her short life.



Hu Huishan Memorial, by Liu Shikun

The walls are decorated with her photos, schoolbag, notebooks, baby teeth tooth and umbilical cord. Being a normal girl rather than a celebrity, Hu's life was of little consequence to the world outside her family.

Liu Jiakun brought photos and a video about the memorial to the biennial.

He first visited Juyuan Middle School on May 15, 2008. "I thought I had met Hu's parents; however, I was not certain. I wasn't shocked at the time," he says.

He returned May 28 and found other parents mourning their children, including a mother whose twin daughters were buried in the ruins.

"It was Liu Li's (Hu's mother) thoughtfulness in keeping her daughter's umbilical cord and baby teeth as well as Hu Ming's (Hu's father) toughness and pride that moved me," he says.

Upon departure, Liu told Hu's mother, "Give a birth to another baby girl and still name her Huishan."

"That is exactly what I was thinking," she replied.

The artist decided to offer the parents long-term help until they could embark on their new life. But he did not know how to help them.

On the next day, he made a call to the father and asked him to help collect the schoolbags scattered on the ground.

On June 21, the artist went back to Juyuan and found the parents still lived in a tent. He told them about his idea to build a small memorial for their daughter.

"Their sincere gratitude for this tiny effort made me reconsider the meaning of life," Liu says.

A screen set on the wall of the memorial shows a series of videos recorded in Juyuan after the artist met Hu's parents.

"I guess this memorial will be the smallest one in the world. But it was built for their daughter, and for all the ordinary people. It shows life is a treasure, and the importance of helping revive this ethnic group," he says.



Hu Huishan Memorial, By Liu Shikun

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