

of its economics, and the very conception of what an art work and an artist is, can change that.

We are, nevertheless, faced with two deep uncertainties: first, that the financial crisis is an unprecedented one – the first in the post-Cold War era to have done what previous crises threatened to do, and become global – and we have no idea of its length, depth or true character. Second, that in its unfolding, we have little notion of the shape of the power relations that will emerge in the world that follows: will this, for example, spell the end of US dominance, as many commentators have been warning for so long?<sup>17</sup> And, if so, where will the new centres be, and what will be the concerns of those who govern them? In that new world, it may be Europeans and North Americans who have to come to terms with the invasion of dominant alien species.

17. See, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power: The US in a Chaotic World* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

# Acting Out in the City

## Artistic Intervention as Production of Public Space

Hou Hanru

### Introduction

We are living in a time of urban spectacle. Contemporary art projects, whether international biennials or urban-scale art events, are an integral part of the rapid expansion of this spectacle. Meanwhile, we are also witnessing a worldwide dramatic trend of privatization, gentrification and social division: public spaces are being increasingly reduced, while civil society and democracy are under threat by the pressure of 'liberal' global capitalism. With the complacency of various political powers, neoliberalism and its economic counterpart, global capitalism, are becoming the homogenizing and even monopolizing model of economic, cultural and social production and exchange. And as a consequence, their impact on society and our public space is undeniable. While social justice, equality and solidarity are being undermined; protest and resistance against this dominant ideological and economic system are being mounted from the bottom of society. A key element in this conflict seems to be the deconstruction of a conception of the public sphere as the physical, political and cultural guarantee for democracy and social participation, in order to make way for a new notion of public space and publicness.

How do these conflicting dynamics play out in our everyday environments? In order to start to answer this question, I will try to sketch the impact of globalization and global capital on the transformation of our cities and societies by introducing some recent examples from China. Furthermore, I would like to take a closer look at some of the fundamental questions involved with curating public art events by asking, for instance, how we can understand this new notion of public space and its relation to the private. How can artistic activities and public art events like



biennials and triennials preserve or produce public spaces, providing platforms to debate or to envision imaginative solutions to the conflicts we are currently facing? What kind of new strategies of public intervention can we imagine to address and implement these issues? Confronted with the way art is being systematically absorbed into the circulating system of capitalism and privatization, we need to reconsider art's very nature and social role and its potential as a platform for resistance and as a generator of alternative social and cultural structures.

### Urban Spectacle

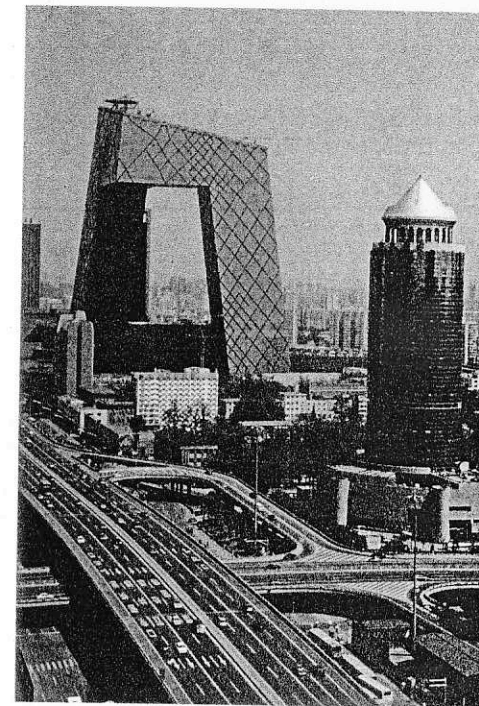
When we talk about globalization, we talk about change: changes we need, and changes we maybe don't need. In the last decade, along with unprecedented urban growth, Asian cities are catching up with this explosive wave of spectacle and urban expansion with a tsunami-like enthusiasm, the Beijing Olympics being the most recent prominent example.

Four centuries ago, the Netherlands, a small country, had an empire around the globe and for a period it was the centre of the world. It founded New Amsterdam, which turned into New York, which became the centre of the world for the last 60 to 70 years. And today, it is the People's Republic of China – that once considered itself to be the centre of the world – that wants to reclaim that status. So in China, globalization is about claiming oneself to be the centre of the world. As we know, one effective way to do this, in part, is to organize a biennial or a triennial, but the best way is to organize the Olympic Games!

Initiating the Olympic Games in Beijing constituted the largest nationalist claim in its most global form. The country spent two billion dollars on the organization of the event, including all sorts of propaganda surrounding the event. The most inventive and magnificent spectacle was staged before the eyes of the world. An image of this world was presented as a perfect society in which a multitude of different communities coexist in peace and harmony. During the opening ceremony 56 children represented the 56 different ethnic minority groups that don't belong to the Han majority (though as it turned out, in reality all of the participating children belonged to the Han majority and were just dressed up in different ethnic costumes). In addition, the best team was put together to deliver a superbly spectacular event. Such as, for instance, artist Cai Guo Qiang, an expert on fireworks, who was contracted to assist Zhang Yimou, the art director of the opening show, who himself is a film director of Hollywood-style big productions.

In addressing some of the questions posed earlier, I want to discuss what goes on beyond this momentary staging of a public spectacle. I would like to focus on the whole project of urbanization involved with organizing the Olympics, because I believe that this process of urbanization, and gentrification, is what

Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren (Office for Metropolitan Architecture), China Central Television Headquarters building (CCTV), Beijing, 2008.  
© Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA).



constitutes the most important part of the globalization process in China today. Renowned architects from all over the world have been brought to China to create spectacular architecture: Herzog & De Meuron designed the Olympic Stadium; Paul Andreu from France did the National Grand Theatre in Beijing (which actually encountered a lot of protest from local architects and urban planners who believe it destroyed the local urban context) and Foster and Partners got Beijing Airport. Let's also not forget the Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas, whose OMA office designed the CCTV Building. The vast majority of these structures designed by these star architects have no apparent formal relation to their surroundings and could just as easily have been constructed on a different continent. To me, this is the way in which globalization today not only operates as a powerful force in the production of (urban) spectacle, but also in the production of (urban) spaces by generating a totally new form of urbanity which is truly global – not only in terms of its aesthetic vernacular, but also its developmental process based on digital imagination and the economical logics of commercial real estate development. This urbanity is very much related to a kind of urban fiction, a fiction that is created by the combined forces of state politics and liberal capitalism. This is certainly how China, as an eager player on the



world stage of globalization, is now inventing a new system for its society in which these two forces are combined in order to generate a new version of utopia to replace the obsolete Maoist one.

### Global Urbanization, Gentrification and the Everyday

The quest for urban spectacle in China does not only play out on the level of political power, it also occurs in the everyday. Catering to the new middle class, project developers are building thousands of new residential and office buildings that are carbon copies of those in Western countries (but tainted with some 'national characteristics'). People are actually trying to turn themselves into global citizens by leading a life identical to their economic counterparts in the West. So in a way, what we see here is the birth of a global *nouveau riche* class, which translates in physical terms into *nouveau riche*-class architecture.

Of course these beautiful dreams have a price. Take, for instance, a neighbourhood in 'Pearl River New Town', a new district of Guangzhou dotted with high-priced residential and office buildings. In front of the neighbourhood there is a large stretch of green, a park which is supposed to be a public space to serve the population of all social classes. But the Guangzhou city planners decided to build a highway that separates the expensive high-rise apartments and the park from the rest of the city, protecting the isolation (segregation) of this high-priced lawn and effectively closing it off to the general public. In other words, a lot of money was spent to build this public park for the citizens of Guangzhou only for it to be enjoyed by those who can afford to live and work in these buildings.

Many city centres in China, like those in many Western countries, are undergoing large-scale urban regeneration projects, usually coined gentrification. 'Regeneration' seems to be a euphemism for the kicking out of the city's original inhabitants. Local governments claim the land and sell it to private developers with the excuse of upgrading the urban conditions, which of course leads to higher prices that only the rich can afford. The original communities are forced to move to less expensive areas in the city, usually on the outskirts.

The emergence of this beautifully designed and spectacular privatization of urban space is a change in our public space that we don't need. What we do need is to reclaim public space from these commercial interests driven by the forces of state politics and global capitalism. Indeed, in recent years resistance movements against gentrification have been organized by local populations across the country.

So called 'nail houses' are probably the most iconic images of this new social trend of resistance to the dominant political and economic powers and the gentrification developments that they generate. The most famous case of a 'nail house' is the following:

one family that lived in such a house, located on a construction site in Chongqing, refused to move out and sell its property to the real estate developers. Instead, the family stayed put and continued living in their house while the building activities carried on, isolating themselves in the middle of the construction site. In the end, construction was actually stopped for more than three years. The family resisted by living inside the house in these conditions and decided to go public with their cause. They put up a national flag as a statement and as a reminder of the Chinese constitution that protects the rights of its citizens. As a result, the municipal government, the project developer and other parties got involved in the negotiations. In the end, the owners of the house won a significant amount of money in compensation. This case has been widely reported on the Internet and in various national media and hailed by the public as a heroic example of the capacity of ordinary people defending their rights and standing up to the pressure of the political and economic authorities. Overnight, hundreds of similar cases were exposed and debated across the country. Some artists have even created works to celebrate their 'victory' (Jiang Zhi's photograph *Things would turn nails once they happened* (2007), rendering the 'nail house' in Chongqing angelically beautiful, is a remarkable example). This example and plenty of others across China show how individuals can resist the negative changes instigated by globalization and actually reclaim their own space. Such acts of resistance finally forced the Chinese government to face reality by submitting a law in October 2007, to be passed by the parliament, resulting in the protection of private property for the first time since the beginning of the communist era.



A 'Nail House', Chongqing, China, until 2007.



### Acting Out in the City: Reclaiming Public Space

Once it became clear that the city of Beijing would host the Olympics, plans were immediately made to redevelop the old city centre, including the Dazhalan area, and turn it into a new cultural district for global tourists. The city authority ordered to demolish the neighbourhood and make it into a theme-park-like 'authentic old Beijing'. The original inhabitants were forced to move out of their houses. Resistances by the community were mounted. Violent confrontations between the inhabitants and the authorities occurred, and intellectuals and artists got engaged. Ou Ning, Cao Fei and their research group started working on a documentary about this process of demolition. And again they encountered some people who refused to leave their houses and put up a national flag as a sign of protest. Ou Ning and Cao Fei's work points to an interesting element of these dynamics of resistance, which is the powerful role of the camera. They handed one of the protesters a camera to document the negotiations and confrontations with the police, and when the demolition team arrived and he started to film it, suddenly the police decided to stop everything...

These gentrification processes inform many of the conditions that artists and curators alike are confronted with when they enter public space, while also becoming an important source of inspiration for their work. Talking about biennials today means talking about how to negotiate the place of art, or artistic intervention, in terms of the negotiation of a public space, which is constantly transformed by the forces of politics and global capital. For this paper, I selected three large-scale urban projects which I curated in the new millennium and which all address the issues I outlined earlier. One project is situated in China, one in Europe and one, in-between, in Istanbul. And for each of these social and spatial situations I will introduce one or two works that, in my opinion, critically engage with the urban transformations we are facing in the age of globalization.

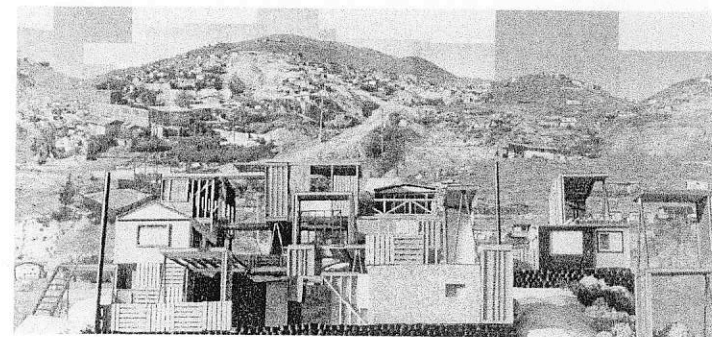
One of these works, included in the 2007 Istanbul Biennial, entitled *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War*, is the research project entitled *Manufactured Sites* (2007) by San Diego-based architect Teddy Cruz. For the last ten years, Cruz has done research along the border between San Diego and Tijuana – between California and Mexico. In one of his projects he ran 30 miles into Mexican territory and 30 miles into American territory to find out how, in the process of globalization, these two different economic systems left their marks on the different typologies of urban organization on both sides of the frontier. He then tried to develop a new architectural system, transporting recycled materials from the USA to Mexico, in an effort to help people improve the conditions of their lives.

I included this project as part of the Istanbul Biennial, as the city there is going through a very spectacular urbanization process. Take the Sulukule quarter, a famous, traditional, Ottoman-style area located next to an old Roman city wall, with a predominantly Romani population that has lived there for hundreds of years. Recently, the neighbourhood has become a very important target for urban developers and the city government to invest in and gentrify, which naturally will lead to the relocation of the existing inhabitants. As a consequence Sulukule has become an important battleground between, on the one side, the intellectuals, architects and other social activists in Istanbul who struggle to conserve historic heritages and the lifestyle of local communities, and on the other the city authorities and developers who try to impose a *nouveau riche* style of urban transformation. This situation became an important context for my 2007 biennial.

The first question that needs to be asked before starting to curate any biennial should be: 'Why does this place need a biennial?' A biennial in such an urban context must be a space for creation and it must start from the desire and utopian possibility to bring in new energy. It must consider the most efficient and effective means to engage artistic activities within the given social reality and to provide innovative visions for change. For me, by bringing both local and international artists together, and by encouraging them to carry out dialogues with the local community, a biennial produces a space where global-local negotiations can take place. Ultimately, it is a continuous process to produce new and ever-changing localities as a part of the constantly restructuring global and artistic order.

In Istanbul, the artist Wong Hoy Cheong from Malaysia decided to explore this situation in Sulukule and engaged in a project with the local population. The Romani community of Sulukule is part of a long line of Roma who arrived in the Byzantine capital over a thousand years ago. Music and dance not only form an integral part of Romani tradition and culture, but also make up their profession and economy. However, in 1991 the state shut down most of their taverns, taking away a large part of their

A housing urbanism made waste: Southern California's first ring of suburbanization (Levittown) is being dismantled as new and large Mac-mansions fill the new periphery while Levittown's debris is recycled to build the new suburbs of Tijuana.  
© Teddy Cruz.



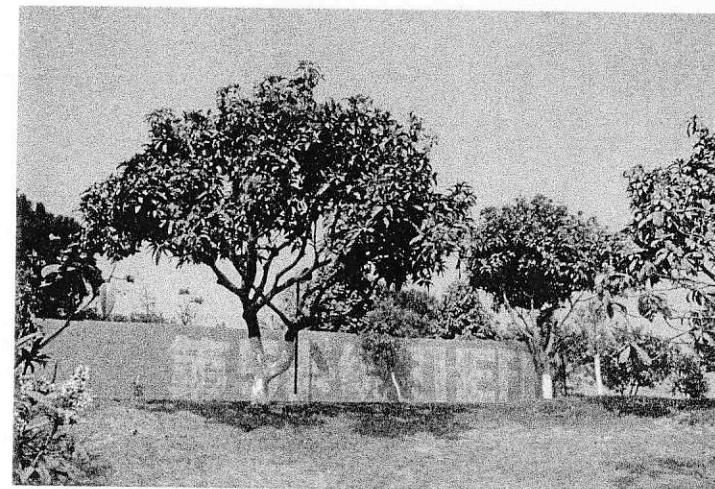


income. On top of that, there are now plans to demolish the houses, relocate the community and gentrify the neighbourhood. Wong Hoy Cheong collaborated with a group of kids from the Romani community and let them participate in informal fieldtrips, play, drawing, photography, video and performance that resulted in an experimental documentary offering insight into the everyday issues these kids are concerned with and the way they deal with their uncertain future, while showing their determination and resistance to the imminent gentrification.

The project I did in 2003 in Shenzhen was called *The Fifth System: Public Art in the Age of Post-Planning*. To start the project, I did some research in the city, discovering that Shenzhen used to be a village on the border between China and Hong Kong. In 1980, it was appointed a Special Economic Zone where the introduction of foreign investment and new industrial development made it a model of urbanization experiments in China. Shenzhen was ultimately transformed into one of the biggest cities in the country, with an official population of seven million and an unofficial one of twice that number. One high-end, high-brow residential area there is built around one of the first theme parks in China. It consists of two parts: 'Beautiful China' and 'Window of the World'. Hotels and offices were also built in the area. They borrow their looks from Venice, for instance, invoking memories of Las Vegas. Together they form a district called 'Overseas Chinese Town'. Interestingly, and different from its American counterparts, there is a museum in the theme park that tries to deal with rather experimental art projects, The Xiangning Art Museum. The existence of such a museum derives from a model plan for urban development in which residences are mixed with 'entertainment' and cultural infrastructures for the benefit of the new middle class. This same model grounded the sculpture biennial, from which a programme of large structures all around the city radiated.

Working on this biennial together with co-curator Pi Li, in our research we basically discerned four different types of interesting urban systems which were defined by four typologies of buildings. Included in these typologies were the theme park itself, high-rise residential buildings, middle-sized office buildings and the road system. All of these four systems are quite fixed, forced together, resulting in a relatively isolated area – a private or gated community. We decided to try to bring other things into the area, something alien to this system, to encourage exchange and dialogue and even to instigate conflict among the inhabitants and people from outside. We called this intervention 'The Fifth System', a sort of mobile, open system that could project new possibilities on urban life. One of the more classic highlights of our project was a pavilion by Olafur Eliasson which was 16 m high and thus very spectacular. This pavilion started to function as a meeting point for people in the centre of the area.

Yan Lei, project for *The Fifth System: Public Art in the Age of Post-Planning*, 5th Shenzhen Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition, He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen, 2003. Photo: Hou Hanru.



Other projects went deeper into the history of the city's recent economic boom. On an existing architectural structure in the central plaza, Yang Jiechang lined up plates with the names of industries and companies that originally existed in this little town. Many of them were now closed and gone. They looked like a memorial of the history of this somehow sad story of industrialization. A concert with a folklore band singing rock'n'roll-like songs telling the stories of these companies was held in the opening. Yan Lei focused on a park in the middle of the city, or rather a piece of abandoned land the size of an Olympic stadium, waiting to be sold by the city for further development. In the name of art, the artist convinced the city government to give him temporary ownership of this piece of land for two years and he then closed it off with a fence with the slogan-like text 'The Fifth System' painted on the surface, and left it undeveloped. It actually meant an important financial deficit for the city, since the city was forced to wait to develop the terrain, and the artist managed to keep the lot empty in the middle of a boomtown, somehow predicting the logic of the nail house family.

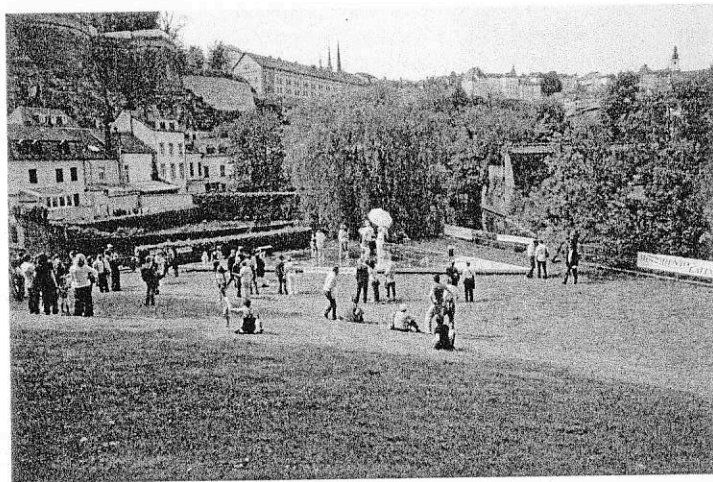
In Luxembourg, for the event of European Capital of Culture in 2007, I realized *Trans(ient) City*. Occupying public spaces across various areas of the city, this project of urban interventions consisted of three different parts: 'Urban Lab', 'Urban Landmarks' and 'Community Life'. The project aimed to demonstrate the dynamics of Luxembourg City as a hub of transitions among different European nations and the necessity to re-energize its public spaces with diverse forms of artistic, architectural and cultural interventions, including the participation of the multi-cultural urban communities. This leads us to further debates on



the future of public spheres in Europe in the time of privatization of urban space. 'Urban Lab' started with a research laboratory on Luxembourg City's historical urban landscape, intending to provide an opportunity for people to foresee the city's future, with the participation of several European schools of architecture, design and cultural management and internationally renowned architecture and town planning agencies. 'Urban Landmarks' saw the birth of architectural artistic projects integrated into urban areas, created as reference points to show off key city sites, such as the projects realized by Olaf Nicolai, Carl Michael von Hausswolff and Périphériques Architectes. Finally, 'Community Life' comprised projects created to revitalize isolated or abandoned urban spaces, giving different communities an opportunity to participate in the development of their cultural imagination, such as the project by Jung Yeondoo.

The *Trans(ient) City* project referred not only to transient art and artists, but the city itself was taken as a site of transience as it expanded and contracted on a daily basis, as a place people passed through to work, and then evacuated in the evenings. The works in public space also occupied itinerant positions – karaoke and tango competitions on specially constructed dance floors, fight clubs and one-euro market stalls were among the strategies employed by the artists.

With all of these examples I hope to have made clear that such curatorial strategies can actually reveal a critical counterforce against the large-scale and money-driven urban transformations happening throughout the current global scene.



Yeondoo Jung, project for *Trans(ient) City*, Luxembourg, 2007. Photo: Hou Hanru.



Hou Hanru and Julian Stallabrass.

## Discussion

*The discussion was moderated by Deborah Cherry, Chair of the Department of Modern Art of the University of Amsterdam and editor of Art History Journal.*

**Moderator:** Both of you focussed on biennials, triennials, Olympics; the magnificent spectacular events of our expansive and extensively spectacular 21st century globalized world. So my first question is: does globalization equal visual spectacle, or are there other, maybe less visible, narratives that run underneath your papers; narratives about different kinds of local engagements, different kinds of interventions in cities and public space? And so my second question is: how can art negotiate, activate, identify and work with local as well as a global politics to engage us as spectators?

**Julian Stallabrass:** It depends on what you mean by 'spectacle'. If used in the Debordian way, the commercialization of social life, then yes, it covers quite a bit, but not everything. The extraordinary architectural and urban global spectacle Hou was talking about is definitely part of it, but there are many, many aspects to globalization that are invisible or at least need to

be made visible. One invidious example of a globalized network is the secret CIA rendition flights, and to answer your question as to how art can work with these phenomena, this particular 'non-spectacular' globalized network is just one of many which various artists, notably Trevor Paglen, have chosen to render visible. There are many complex forces that operate under the radar and are hard to represent but should find representation.

**Hou Hanru:** I believe globalization is a very complex system working gradually over time and on many different levels, almost every level of our life. I would like to differentiate between an external and an internal globalization, one that is very visible, or spectacular if you wish, and one that is not so visible. The latter is a direct effect of the emergence of a global economy and production system that completely changes the structure of a society's population. A typical example of this is migrant workers in Third World countries that came from agricultural areas to work in the so-called new factories of the First World. This movement changes not only the psychological but also the social structures of a society. At the same time, I believe that globalization also happens on the body of one person. Another important moment is when the spectacle is being brought into



the individual life, privatized life, such as the sample I mentioned of Mr Chang, who is living in this old house trying to defend himself against the demolition of his house in order to make way for a grand-scale urbanization project, and he happens to pick up a video camera and record the event, as a kind of witness to the process of this violent gentrification. To me this signifies a very important moment of what I call internal globalization: on the one hand the recognition of the power of the mediatized spectacle, and on the other hand the transformation of the identity of this person and his community. So on one side we see the emergence of a global city through gentrification and all the changes it brings that we don't need, and on the other side the prosperity provided by this new technology which would not happen if there was no globalization.

**Moderator:** Could I just take up what you've been saying about migration? Hou, you stated that globalization is about change and one of the largest changes associated with globalization has been migration, many forms of migration. Generally we think of the migration of people, but there is also the migration of forms, technology, capital, knowledge and movement, and of art. Could you expand a bit on the ways in which art has engaged migration?

**Hou Hanru:** Again, migration has a very important impact on art. Firstly, today you see more and more artists from different cultures living in major international cities. They actually play increasingly important roles in the transformation of the art scene of that city. Secondly, when we move from migration to questions of integration and transformation, this sometimes happens in a very radical way, remember for example the violent upheavals in the Parisian suburbs, and these events raise many questions about a society that for a lot of artists, including

so-called non-Western artists, are a starting point in their projects when they work in these contexts. They try to bring in the artistic intervention not only as a kind of social service to help people, but also to bring up a sort of self-awareness, even self-critique, to help this community re-invent its own future.

**Audience:** I heard Mr Hanru and Mr Stallabrass propose two different models of curating: Mr Hanru essentially proposes a methodology that, for me, has to do with navigating forces in real life, or as you phrased it, navigating between the change that we need and the change that we don't need, while Mr Stallabrass seems to advocate in a way a form of resistance curating, which I feel is more about resisting certain mechanisms of the art world and the art market rather than challenging forces in reality. How would you describe your curatorial practice?

**Julian Stallabrass:** The art world is part of reality! It might like to think of itself as separate but it's absolutely connected, and I think the art world is actually quite an important aspect of the ideology of neoliberalism and of capitalism in general. So I do think that to make visible, or more visible, its operations and open it up to critique is in itself valuable.

**Hou Hanru:** For me really, the role of the curator evolves even more quickly and is more complicated in the context of today's globalized societies. It's not that simple anymore to identify what the changes are that we need and the ones we don't need, I think it's all about engaging with change itself. So what is needed would be generated over time, during the process. I think making exhibitions or artistic interventions, organizing or imagining, producing this kind of events, is all about making proposals for the next step of change, envisioning the next threshold.

