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Xing Danwen: Revealing the Masquerade of Modernity

From the moment Beijing was awarded the honour of hosting the Olympic Games in 2001, city officials set about improving the capital city through a series of modernization projects in order to gain positive recognition from a global audience. Leading planners for the Games sought to overcome criticism regarding China's communist history, human rights violations, and international exploits by spending over forty billion dollars on pre-Olympic development and at least one hundred million dollars on the opening ceremonies alone. This is more than twice what was spent for the opening ceremony at Athens. Renovation of the city is hardly new. Indeed, since the end of the Mao era, the city has been in a perpetual state of change. As China enters the socioeconomic global capitalist playing field, what is referred to as the modern "transnational space,"¹ its self-consciousness is revealed through radical transformations and costly renovations throughout its metropolitan centers.

These transformations are at once awe-inspiring and treacherous. Over the past decades, as China has become a key player in the global economy, and as Beijing has prepared for the international coverage brought on by the Games, thousands of inhabitants have been displaced. Traditional courtyard houses have been demolished in favour of modern high-rise condominiums, shopping centers, and office buildings. Many who once lived within the city limits have been forced to relocate to nearby suburbs. Many have lost jobs in the process as the commute has become too difficult and time consuming. While some see the process of globalization as a catalyst for the creation of new spaces of identity, others simply see it as a sacrilegious burial of a shared historical identity. The complexities of this issue were examined extensively by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist in their exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Cities on the Move*. Twelve years ago they summarized the problem as follows:

Modernization in many Asian countries, which has been considered as a process of re-enforcement of national identities, sometimes even religious and ideological identities, is ironically accompanied by a general deconstruction and disintegration of established values and cultural modes. . . . Uncertainty, along with the disintegration and liquification of the Self hence become the main issues that Asian people are about to cope with.²

More than a decade later their predictions ring true. What this exhibition sought to examine and what I seek to question is the result of what Hou and Obrist refer to as the "implicit double-binds"³ that the clash of modernization and a long-established cultural identity create. My primary concern is not the physical destruction and reconstruction of Chinese cities



resulting from globalization and urbanization. It is, rather, the psychological implications of identity, the “disintegration and liquification of the Self” that Hou and Obrist argue for, that is of particular significance. The instability of the structural fabric of the city is a reflection of or precursor to the instability the individual feels in identifying with his or her own city.

Xing Danwen, installation view of *disCONNEXION* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney Biennale, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

The ideological shift from the Mao era to the era of global capitalism has led to a visible shift in the urban landscape. City planners and architects have abandoned the horizontal layout favoured during the Cultural Revolution for the vertical. The myth behind major metropolitan renovation projects is that such endeavours are representative of the wishes of those living and working within them, when, in reality, it may only represent the values of a select privileged few. In her article “Architecture of the Evicted,” Rosalyn Deutsche outlines the redevelopment projects in New York City in recent decades under the auspices of returning to tradition, preserving identity, or augmenting the arts. Such projects result in homogenization of the city through exclusionary tactics, and, for Deutsche, these “procedures consolidate the city as territory, constructing a domain over which power is exercised by controlling relations of inclusion/exclusion and presence/absence.”⁴ Her story of the misplaced victims of gentrification is very similar to that of the victimization of citizens in Beijing’s recent history, and it is also applicable to that of the misfortunes of thousands of people in dozens of growing cities throughout the world. To those watching the Olympic Games, the ever-changing face of Beijing coincides remarkably with Western capitalist values. Those misplaced protestors who occasionally appeared in the international media, however, did not fit in with the carefully choreographed Olympic production, and they represent those who are slowly being edited out of the media coverage.

Just as China has recently become an influential global economic power, so have contemporary Chinese artists recently become increasingly popular to an international audience. Interestingly, practicing Chinese artists have gained more recognition from abroad than they have in their native land. Because of this, their works tend to be financially and ideologically autonomous from the governmental concerns of China, and this freedom provides them the opportunity to raise critical questions about the state of



the Chinese city, the state of China, and its place within a global framework. These artists therefore occupy a highly critical ideological space for questioning the effects of modernization.

One such artist, Xing Danwen, seeks to understand the repercussions of such vast and rapid changes on the psyche of the human subject. Rather than focusing on the moment of destruction or the process of new construction like other artists such as Zhang Dali, Zhan Wang, and RongRong, Xing's work focuses on the final stage of the process of urbanization, after the new building has been erected, after the transnational, global space is complete. In the catalogue made to accompany the exhibition *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Wu Hung asserts that while in theory a demolition project "promises renewal, numerous demolition sites in Beijing have been left in a demolished state for several years. These places lie outside normal life, not only spatially, but also in a temporal sense: time simply vanishes in these black holes."⁵ Interestingly, Xing's works reveal that the modern spaces—the visual landscapes—that come into being after the urbanization projects are complete similarly lie outside normal life, spatially and temporally. In these spaces, too, time vanishes into black holes.

Xing's photographic series *disCONNEXION* draws the viewer into what appears to be an abstract painting, a complex layering of colours and textures. The truth behind the works, however, is a harsh reality in conceptual opposition to their beautiful composition. In her *Duplication* series, Xing photographed piles of children's toys. Shot at a toy factory, each composition is filled with a different type of doll. At first glance, the viewer is transported to memories of childhood games and expectations for the future. In the end, her photographs raise questions applicable to humans of all ages. In her series *Urban Fiction*, Xing makes a close examination of the effects of urbanization on modern people. Using photographs of architectural maquettes as her backdrop, she focuses on the incongruity of the organic person acting within very inorganic and modern architectural spaces. In her most recent series, *Wall House*, Xing closely explores the sense of isolation that comes with modernization. She examines the psychological and physical boundaries that act as social barriers in a

metropolitan environment, giving the viewer an intimate look into the every day life of a young woman in the city. In all four series, the artist uses her medium to create a microcosm for the modern global society. The viewer is initially attracted to the large scale, bright colours, and interesting patterns of the compositions. But further exploration of the works uncovers a disconcerting truth behind the shiny veneer.



DisCONNEXION (2002–03)

In her series *disCONNEXION*, Xing presents a group of photographs compositionally reminiscent of abstract expressionist paintings. And like abstract expressionist paintings, they are artistically strong because of their aesthetic appeal. Initially the viewer is taken in by swirling white loops infinitely overlapping one another, cream-colored honeycombs overflowing with undulating black snakes, or piles of golden hair-like strands weaving in upon themselves. Further inspection, however, reveals the white loops and golden strands to be electronic wires, the honeycombs to be burlap sacks, and the black snakes to be cords capped off by computer or cell phone chargers. These photographs were taken in southern China's Guangdong province. They capture just a small portion of the electronic waste transported from industrialized countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and the United States, to the processing centres on the Chinese coast. Hundreds of people make their living by recycling the large piles of e-waste that have been discarded by transnational corporations. The physical and psychological conditions under which these workers labour are often dangerous and oppressive. For Xing, this is just one effect of the global modernization project:

Modernization and globalization shape urban development. In my country, I have experienced and witnessed the changes that have taken place under the influence of Western modernity. These changes have contributed to a strong and powerful push for development in China, but at the same time they have led to a big environmental and social nightmare in remote corners of China.”⁶

In this series, Xing has created a beautiful fantasy out of a hopeless situation. In his discussion of *disCONNEXION*, Gao Minglu asserts that “Xing Danwen uses aesthetic modernity to represent or reproduce the global industrial modernity. She uses the modernist aesthetic of ‘beneficial beautification’ to offset the harmful nature of her subject. In the end, she is able to unify the initial dislocation between the beautified form of the

Left: Xing Danwen, *disCONNEXION*, Number 6, 2002–03, chromogenic color print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Middle: Xing Danwen, *disCONNEXION*, Number 11, 2002–03, chromogenic color print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Xing Danwen, *disCONNEXION*, Number 9, 2002–03, chromogenic color print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

electronic trash and its harmful nature.”²⁷ While Gao argues that Xing unifies beauty and harm in these works, I argue that rather than unifying, she intelligently highlights the contradiction.

In this series Xing does not only comment on the effects of the e-waste in southern China. Her works are indicative of the realities of all aspects of



Left: Xing Danwen, *Duplication, Number 1*, 2003, chromogenic color print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Middle: Xing Danwen, *Duplication, Number 2*, 2003, chromogenic color print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



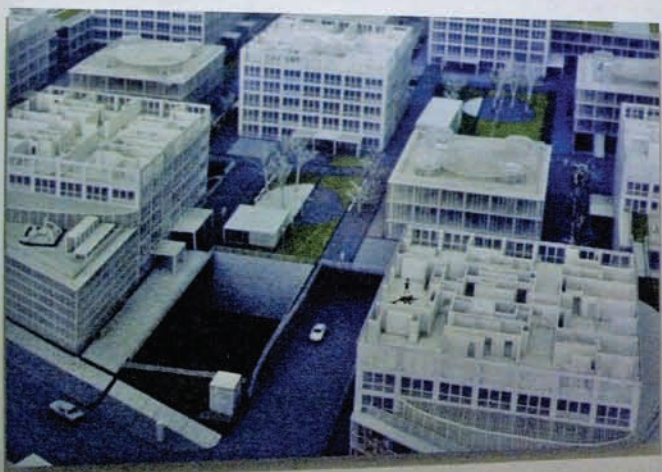
Right: Xing Danwen, *Duplication, Number 4*, 2003, chromogenic color print, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

modernization throughout China. In terms of urbanization, the aesthetics of modernity are enticing in their smooth efficiency. Humans are complex creatures who are drawn to beautiful and simple facades in hopes that they might help to sort out their own complicated lives. The modern architecture in growing Chinese cities offers hopes of a new beginning, an easier existence, and a more beautiful lifestyle. While this may be true to a certain extent, for the most part it is a false promise. Modernity comes with a price that its aesthetics attempt to disguise. By imitating the promises set forth by modernity's aesthetics, Xing reveals its inherent illusion.

Duplication (2003)

Employing the same aesthetic strategies, Xing explores another side effect of modernization in her 2003 series *Duplication*. Consisting of six images, this series captures thousands of identical or almost identical portions of children's dolls. As in *disCONNEXION*, the entire composition is filled with layers of plastic scrap, rendered useless in their dismembered state. In *Duplication 1*, for instance, the viewer is faced with a pile of bald, chubby-cheeked, peach-coloured dolls' heads. Some stare vacantly ahead while others lie with closed eyes. The heads vary in size and shape but all are Caucasian and bald. *Duplication, Number 2* captures the heads of hundreds of stern-browed men, all with the same close-cropped hair cut. Every head has identical black hair, pale skin, and set jaw, with the exception of one blonde head located almost in the center of the composition. Perhaps the most eerie photograph of the series, *Duplication, Number 4*, focuses on the heads of young female dolls that seem to be drowning in a sea of their own long blonde hair. Despite their decapitated state, the dolls' expressions remain blank, feigning animation with black eyelashes and rosy cheeks.

Children's dolls act as more than mere entertainment. They provide humans with their first exposure to an ideal. They are the socially constructed prototype for the ideal child, the ideal man, the ideal woman. In this series, Xing Danwen explores the notion of the ideal in contemporary culture. In our current global society the prototype for the ideal human transgresses



national boundaries. Her artist's statement about the series suggests the existence of global ideals is stifling to Chinese societies and by extension to all humans:

Today, no longer solely a population of naturally conceived humans, we are experiencing an accelerated era of development with a defined goal of modernizing our systems and our lifestyle. People study and struggle to achieve a standardized excellence in both their personal and professional life. We see fashion and beauty in advertising and media, and we find that the aesthetics used promote a universal model and that distinctiveness is not encouraged. Educational and job requirements lead people to train themselves to become a specific "type" and learn specific functions in order to succeed. Individuality decreases. In order to improve ourselves as human beings, we think we must follow, rather than lead, and that we must copy to fit into specific and accepted classifications. There is a point at which this process can be viewed as another form of cloning.⁸

Are the photographed dolls representations of an ideal mold we must fit into in order to have a place within our global society? Rather than opening the doors to new ways of being, does the new global market act as a greater catalyst for homogenization?

This crisis of personal identity parallels the effects urbanization has had on the built environment. Like the dolls, cities around the world are becoming less and less differentiated. Chinese cities are looking to already industrialized cities in places like Japan and the United States as models for modernization. In this light, the sentiments of international architects like Rem Koolhaas, architect of the new China Central Television Tower in Beijing, seem somewhat reasonable. Rather than focusing on the nation's past, Koolhaas calls for a new perspective on Chinese cities. He embraces the aesthetics of globalization, and instead of lamenting the past, he

Xing Danwen, installation view of *Urban Fiction* in the exhibition *China Show, Urbis*, Manchester, U.K., 2006. Courtesy of the artist.



celebrates what he considers to be a clean slate, a land of new architectural opportunities. In his words, “Instead of resisting this globalization, we should theorize about it. . . . Perhaps we have to shed our identities. Perhaps identity is constricting us.” He suggests that the situation should be looked at as “ . . . a blank page for us to work with” or even as a “liberation.”⁹ While his view is controversial in its callous disregard for historical space, it could be an answer to Xing’s critique. The new architecture being erected in Beijing alone lends itself to anything but homogenization. Koolhaas’s Central Chinese Television Tower looks like a skyscraper that has been folded into fourths and stood on end, the new opera house looks like a futuristic silver egg, and the design for the Beijing Olympic Stadium resembles a birds’ nest. Although they may be displacing hundreds of old residences, they are new and original. This type of innovation supports Wu Hung’s assertion that this kind of “destabilizing process can be enormously energizing, because instability is often a necessary condition for a self-examination devoid of the confidence and optimism attached to a ‘self imposed ideology.’”¹⁰ This architecture could, therefore, provide new alternatives for a seemingly fixed ideal.

Xing Danwen’s art revolves around the effects the modern visual environment has on humans. According to Wu, the influence is obvious: “The rapid development of a market economy has not only altered the shape of the city but has brought about fundamental changes in social structure, ideology, and morality; even more striking are the shifts in people’s identities and relationships.”¹¹ Just as the market economy has affected the face of the city, Xing’s *Duplication* series points out the homogenizing effects global society has had on global citizens. It is perhaps telling of her intentions that this series is so aesthetically similar to *disCONNEXION*. Both series capture the excesses of modernity using the same formal language.

Urban Fiction (2004–08)

The focus of Xing Danwen’s photographic series *Urban Fiction* is the final stage of the process of urbanization: the erection of modern buildings and

their subsequent inhabitation. In this ongoing series Xing photographs maquettes of real estate development projects as displayed in the offices of their developers. She then superimposes photographs of people (usually herself) acting out personal dramas to the scale of the model so as to predict the way humans might interact with the space. The result is an almost comical discord between the new architecture and human behaviour. While one is tightly controlled and regulated, the other is unpredictable.

The idea for this project came to her while she was traveling on a train through Europe. She knew that she wanted to comment on urbanization, but she wanted to take an original point of view. In an interview with Britta Erickson she discusses other artists working with the same topic:

In the past few years, I have seen many photo-artists working on the subject of urbanization. Some of them have expressed their concepts well about how modernization and globalization have made cities similar everywhere, but mostly their work is based on straight shots of real cities, of very similar places. It makes me very conscious and alert that I should definitely not repeat the same, but instead create something new, fresh, different and original in my own way I wanted to do the complete opposite, starting from a fake landscape to talk about its reality.¹²

Initially, Xing had the idea that she would build her own real estate maquettes. She realized, however, that while the maquettes represented a fictionalized reality, a maquette that she created would be even further from the truth. Indeed, as Xing herself recalls:

At the beginning, with the difficulty of access to the real estate maquette, I even thought maybe I should build a maquette by myself. After succeeding with more shots, I no longer continued with this thought because the real estate maquette is completely different from the maquette I would have built by myself. It has an essential difference. The real estate project is the real [thing]. A maquette built by me would be totally a personal design and fantasy of buildings and urban architecture landscape.¹³

Part of the disorientation of urbanization is the result of the individual's lack of agency in the face of such a change. People are often ordered to move from their homes and eventually forced out if they refuse. The new apartments are very different from the old homes, and lack familiar architectural and personal details. If Xing had created her own maquette and subsequently inserted pictures of herself inside it, she would not be acknowledging this psychological upheaval. Creating her own space and then picturing herself within it, is very different from the forced transition of an individual into a completely new and alien environment.

The models appear almost like toys, like Barbie mansions complete with plastic trees and Matchbox-like cars. Xing uses only the lighting available to her in the architectural offices, thus further emphasizing the artificial nature of the scene. It is therefore slightly unsettling to find a photograph of a real person standing behind the squeaky clean window of an empty high-rise or sunning herself on an empty, sunless patio. As hinted at by Xing in the quote

above, perhaps these works are not as far from reality as they initially appear. Xing herself used to dream of living in a modern city, and her dreams have come true: “Given the circumstances of when and how I grew up, I could only imagine the modern city and its high-rises through film clips or magazine photographs—everything seemed unreachable, distant, the image of the West. But suddenly I realized that today I am completely living my teenage dream of what life should be.”¹⁴ In this way it is as if Xing feels that she has somehow been cut from the reality of her past and pasted into the present.

But as Andrew Maerke asserts in his article “Xing Danwen’s Chinese Fantasy,” “Urbanity itself has always been a fiction, a construct of imperial or, in some cases, bureaucratic wills to power. The traffic of daily life—public squares, commemorative roundabouts and grand parks—reminds us that we are not who we think we are, or that we are not who we should be.”¹⁵ The urban environment itself may be as steeped in fantasy as the maquettes. Maerke’s comments underscore the truth that the physical manifestation of a city rarely reflects the values and ideals of all of its citizens. Especially in the case of China, where urbanism is occurring rapidly without much consideration, the metropolis is a deviation from many (perhaps most) realities.

Another urban fiction is revealed in this series. It is the fiction of the promises of modernity, the promises that the maquettes represent. They are sleek and simplified, enticing under the calming lights and quiet atmosphere of the office. One could almost lose oneself in dreams of the way such an efficient, pristine building could improve one’s life. In such a setting, the buildings presented are idealized, lacking the cacophony of traffic and detritus of daily life. Wu Hung argues that the problem of urbanization is a matter of theory versus reality: “In theory, demolition and relocation were conditions for the capital’s modernization. In actuality, these conditions brought about a growing alienation between the city and its residents: they no longer belonged to one another.”¹⁶ But, as Xing’s series reveal, human problems still occur in even the most sterile of environments. While the dream of modernity becomes a reality, the dream that modernity brings happiness is revealed as false. One fundamental aspect that is omitted from these real estate maquettes is the place of the human. Xing reveals that the true impact of the architectural models will only be revealed once the human is incorporated.

All of the photographs in the series invoke a sense of the uncanny. One photograph in the series, for example, captures the uppermost portion of a model of an apartment complex. Three figures are visible: one woman appears to be exercising on the roof, another stands at her window, talking on a phone, and the third, visible in profile, applies makeup two floors below. The windows are lit from behind with a uniform blue glow. The time of day is unclear—the bright light from within indicates night time, but the well-lit roof and exercising woman hint at the presence of daylight. Although the women appear to be content, a certain melancholy pervades the work. They live close to one another and yet are alone, completely unaware of each other’s presence.

Another photograph, *Urban Fiction, Number 18*, depicts a modern shopping center with various advertisements for clothing and makeup. Three cars drive past on the glossy grey street, across which two diminutive women walk together, one with a shopping bag and the other with flowers. The

ridiculousness of the scene lies in its emptiness. It is reminiscent of a post-apocalyptic movie in which two survivors walk in a city where nothing living remains. The only reminders of society are the advertisements in the window of the shopping centre. Or perhaps it is a comment on the realities of a capitalist society, where the number one goal is to sell and to buy. In such a society nothing is important if it cannot be made into a commodity. Therefore, the relationship between human beings is downplayed while the relationship between consumer and product is emphasized.

A similar sense of isolation, though this time infused with despair, is present in another photograph, *Urban Fiction, Number 17*, containing just one human figure. Amid a forest of white high-rise office buildings, a woman stands on the top of a building. Barely visible amid the seemingly gigantic skyscrapers, the woman appears to be on the brink of jumping. Her psychological agitation is reinforced by her physical isolation. She is the only figure in sight. Although she stands atop a huge building meant to hold thousands of people, it is empty. In fact, the viewer can actually see through the windows of the buildings, revealing that these shells are void of human life. What is striking about these works is how small in scale the humans appear in comparison to the large, imposing architecture that surrounds them. The dramas of the figures in Xing's series are voyeuristically followed to the most private of spaces by the all-seeing eye of the artist. Rather than being among family and friends (one characteristic typical of the old courtyard homes), individuals are separated into tidy compartments. They are cut off from each other and from reminders of their past. More than the eerie lighting and cut-and-paste effect of Xing's method, it is this separation that makes this series so unsettling. The urban environment, old and new, therefore, represents something immense for Chinese citizens. It is not simply the view one sees from a window—it is a way of life, a stimulation of memories, a reflection of belief systems. In his article about contemporary Chinese artists' responses to the transforming of Chinese cities, David Spalding recalls the presence of *hutong* (*siheyuan*), courtyard housing meant for the inhabitation of three generations of a single family. According to Spalding, "No less important than the earthbound residents of a *siheyuan*, ancestor's tablets and family shrines played an integral role in the division of space: traditionally, these living pieces of the past were carefully positioned to receive the first rays of morning light that pierce the *siheyuan*'s southeast entrance."¹⁷ Since the 1980s, these *siheyuan* and ancestor's tablets and family shrines have virtually vanished. Xing knows that such a transition is a double-edged sword:

When people who live in old, very crowded courtyard houses suddenly have to move to high-rise buildings, they feel happy to have a toilet, a kitchen and all the basic conveniences. At the same time, they are no longer living as a big family with their neighbours. In the new, massive residential buildings, people might never even bump into their neighbours in the elevator, people might have a bigger space to themselves—and yet feel very isolated and lonely in their heavenly cubes.¹⁸

Indeed, the new face of the city encourages a disconnection, a separation. Even in public spaces, as seen in *Urban Fiction, Number 18* of the series, a sense of community has been lost.

Top: Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Number 19*, 2006, chromogenic color print, 218.5 x 170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

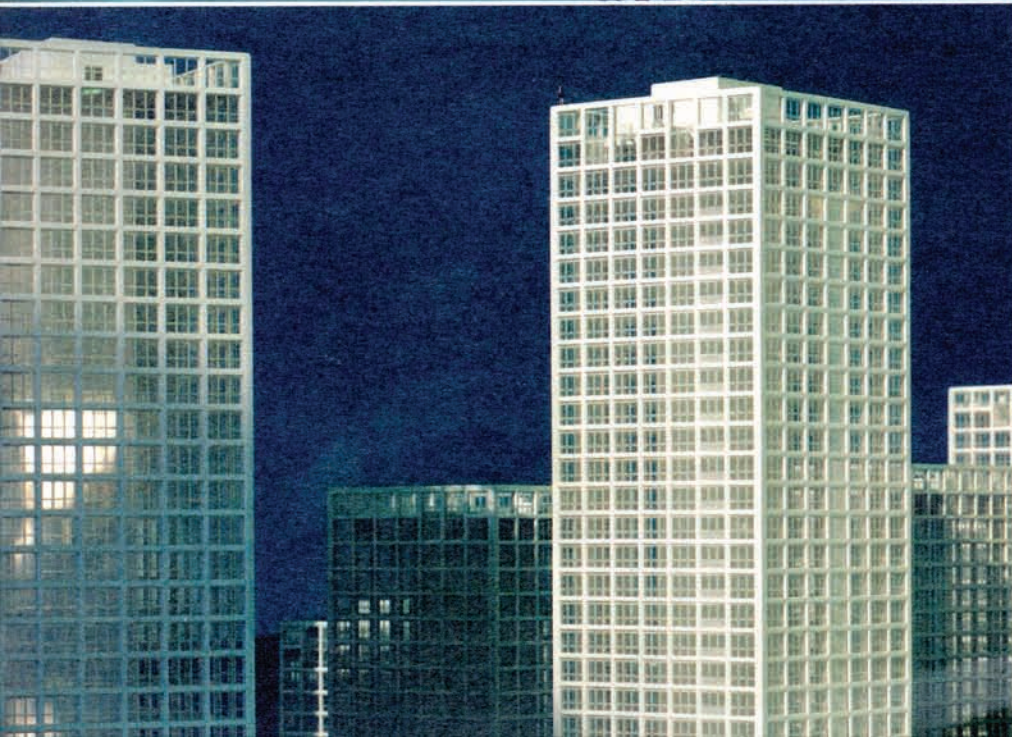
Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Number 19* (detail), 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

Middle: Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Number 18*, 2004, chromogenic color print, 272 x 170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Number 18* (detail), 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Number 17*, 2004, chromogenic color print, 213.3 x 170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Number 17* (detail), 2004. Courtesy of the artist.



A further interpretation can be made when comparing this series to a similar series of urban ruins by the artist RongRong. Both series are examples of what RongRong refers to as “meta-pictures,”¹⁹ photographs framed within a photograph. In RongRong’s series of three untitled photographs he captured the ruins found in Beijing’s demolition sites between 1996 and 1997. Rather than digitally superimposing another photograph over the original (like Xing Danwen), RongRong hung posters of famous entertainers or advertisements on the dilapidated ruins and framed images of the entire scenes. One of the works, for instance, features a partially standing wall plastered with posters and what appears to be a calendar. The wall hangings, presumably leftover decorations from a recent exodus, immediately lead the viewer to reflect upon the identities of the original owners. Much of the image’s power lies in the sense it conveys of a violent transition from the private to the public. Wall decorations that once served as entertainment for the enjoyment of the home’s inhabitants are now exposed to all. The three primary posters feature glamorous women posing in luxurious settings. Two of the posters are only partially preserved, their bottom halves having been ripped from the wall. One remains wholly intact. The beautiful women in elegant gowns gaze alluringly at the viewer amid an ancient bust, lit candles, and an extravagant bouquet. The opulence and luxury of the posters stand in stark contrast to their dismal surroundings.

This photograph, like Xing’s *Urban Fiction*, invites the viewer to contemplate the distinction between reality and marketable fiction. As I have discussed above, in Xing’s work the maquettes represent fiction while the dramas superimposed within could stand for human reality. In RongRong’s photograph, the advertisements represent a fiction while the surrounding ruins are reality. The only real aspect of either artist’s works are the ruins in RongRong’s photograph. He has manipulated a real space within a real city into a fictitious space that encourages daydreams of a fictitious inhabitant who once lived there. The posters of the staged models in an elegant setting are revealed to be a false reality because of their location within the ruins and their tattered condition. The fantasy behind them proves to be ridiculous once their surroundings have collapsed. Comparing this to *Urban Fiction*, however, I am forced to acknowledge the similarities between the women in the posters and Xing posed as different characters. While my argument above places the “reality” of the superimposed models in contrast with their fictitious surroundings, this comparison suggests a more complicated relationship. Like the models in RongRong’s posters, Xing herself wears makeup and poses theatrically, acting out make-believe scenarios for the sole purpose of being integrated into photographs of the maquettes. Therefore, the human actions taking place within the maquettes in Xing’s works are revealed to be just as fictitious as the promises of happiness associated with the new real estate.

The difference between Xing’s figures and the models on the posters is the absence of idealism. The models in RongRong’s posters represent wealth, beauty, and happiness. Xing’s models act out everyday activities such as exercising, applying makeup, talking on the phone, and walking with friends. It is not their poses or expressions that infuse the images with a sense of isolation or discontentedness, but their placement within the composition. In some ways, *Urban Fiction* represents a completely valid reality: the reality of Xing’s imagination. When people look at maquettes they automatically imagine what their life would be like if they lived in the perspective

environment. In this series Xing simply reveals her own predictions. The knowledge that some of the maquettes have already been constructed while others will perhaps never leave the office, or that all of the figures are Xing herself posing, further complicates the question of reality. In this way, these “meta-pictures” balance on the cusp of reality and fiction. She is a real person acting out real actions superimposed onto a real photograph of a real maquette that might represent a building that has already been built in the city. In the same way, the posters in RongRong’s work might now, twelve years after the photographs were taken, be closer to the reality of the site than the ruins themselves. Perhaps the message behind Xing’s series is that when a space changes so rapidly from old to new, the distinction between reality and fantasy fades slightly. A person’s identity and self-concept is based upon the living and working environments to which they are accustomed, as well as upon corresponding human interactions with friends, family, and co-workers. Radical change in built environments, then, inevitably leads to changes in patterns of human interaction, which can lead to crisis and collapse in individual and collective identities. Xing uses *Urban Fiction* to suggest that modernity’s impersonal architectural spaces impose a human penalty: rebuilding lost personal identity, and by implication, lost collective identity, may prove to be a greater challenge than rebuilding a demolished architectural environment.

Wall House (2007)

In her most recent photographic series, *Wall House*, Xing provides an intimate look at the isolated individual living within the modern metropolis. As in *Urban Fiction*, she uses a cut-and-paste method to create a narrative within a staged setting. This series consists of four photographic images and one digital video that examine the everyday reality of actually living in a modern space like those represented by the maquettes. In 2007, Xing took part in the Wall House Foundation Residency Program in Northern Holland where she lived alone in the Wall House for two weeks. The Wall House was designed by architect John Hejduk and built in 2001, one year after his death. It is an innovative modern design that separates living spaces and working spaces. One half is made up of three stories, consisting of living room, kitchen, dining room, and bedroom. The other half houses more public and professional spaces, such as an office, corridor, and stairs. These two halves are divided by a large cement wall. From the exterior, the sense of division is enhanced by the physical separation of one room from another, with each painted a different colour from the next. Inside, the visitor is forced to consider this separation as he or she moves back and forth between the cement wall to explore each room. The Wall House, like many of Hejduk’s other architectural plans, is a highly theoretical space in which he wished to address the concepts of space and time. In this case, the wall represents a threshold between the past and the present. In Xing’s words, “In the case of the Wall House, the occupant always feels detached from what happens on the other side of the wall and, at the same time, that person will always have the feeling of being a stranger within the interior—essentially creating a sense of isolation on both sides of the wall.”²⁰

In the context of Chinese urbanization, one is hard pressed to imagine a better foil to the traditional courtyard house. In this house, Xing found the perfect setting to physically examine the interaction of the human and the modern living space. In *Urban Fiction*, Xing acted as a voyeur spying from afar into her staged human dramas. In *Wall House*, on the other hand, because of the close range of the photographs as well as their large size, the viewer becomes

part of the drama. This concept is taken further within the gallery space where Xing displays the photographs on white plaster walls adjoining at right angles to signify multiple apartments. In these works, rather than looking in, Xing explores the idea of looking out. Although the actual house is located in Holland, she has digitally inserted images of Chinese cityscapes that are now seen through the windows. In one of the photographs, for instance, the figure of the artist is seen from behind. She sits in a chair in front of a large square window through which appears an eight-lane highway congested with traffic. The room is bare, the walls are white, and the only visible furnishings are two plastic chairs and a round table. A coffee cup and a cell phone rest on the table. It is as though the young woman in the photograph is watching a drama unfold in front of her that she longs to enter. The presence of the cell phone further intensifies this sense of longing, symbolizing a key link to the outside world, and yet no one is calling.

In another photograph, a woman sits alone on a couch. Across from her sits a glass coffee table adorned with a small bouquet of flowers. A television is tuned in to what appears to be a news report. The room is entirely lined with horizontal windows through which a metropolitan skyline can be seen, teeming with high rises. The woman stares out the windows, entirely disinterested in the television program. If this scene represents an actual apartment in Beijing, the view that distracts the woman so thoroughly could be a mirror image of her apartment building and its surroundings. This further invokes the cyclic concept that is present in Xing's artistic progression from *Urban Fiction* to *Wall House*. In a modern urban setting where people virtually live on top of each other there is both a desire to be private and have a space of one's own, but also to see what others are doing, to breach the barrier of the reflective glass. For Xing, this series was highly motivated by a sense of loneliness:

In *Wall House*, I use Hedjuk's problematic physical space as a starting point and continue to explore themes of contemporary loneliness and detachment in urban life. I project the idea of emotion and physical displacement through the use of a solitary figure: "I" live alone without a choice and "I" am obligated to accept this loneliness. Confronted with this reality, I am searching for truth and an answer to the question, "how does one live alone?" I intend to raise awareness about living alone, where "you" are your only companion.²¹



Xing Danwen, installation views of *Wall House* in the exhibition *Another Voice*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

In yet another photograph is Xing's visual articulation of being one's only companion. Here again, a woman is seen from behind. She wears only black underpants and her long, black, curly hair spills freely down her back. This could be a scene of any woman preparing for work in the morning in the privacy of her own bathroom. On the counter next to her lie a hair brush and numerous bottled cosmetics. A roll of toilet paper sits on the window sill. The reflection in the mirror, however, does not coincide with the woman in the foreground. She gazes back into the eyes of the partially nude woman, applying makeup in imitation of her double. She, however, wears a silvery-blue shoulder-length wig with blunt bangs and a pink shirt. To the left of the mirror and slightly smaller, is a square window through which the base of a skyscraper can be viewed directly behind a wide street. What is evidenced here is the juxtaposition of interior, domestic space, with exterior, public space, thus paralleling John Hejduk's original intentions. The woman's reflection is not an exact reflection of the woman who is looking in the mirror because she has been altered for public display. Although the woman in the mirror may at once appear to be someone else, she is, however, the same woman, exhibiting just another aspect of her complicated identity. Like the building seen through the window, she possesses a contemporary, hip appearance. Here, Xing makes a connection between living within a city that is in a constant state of change and the duality of private and public that is found within us all.

Xing Danwen, *Wall House, Image 4*, 2007, C-print, video animation. Courtesy of the artist.



The setting of the final photograph is a starkly decorated bedroom. A negligee lies casually across the empty bed, the sheets of the bed still wrinkled from a recent inhabitant. Shoes are strewn about the room. The eye is immediately drawn to the window occupying most of the right wall. It has been partially covered by a curtain, but a portion of the amorphous opening is left uncovered, again revealing city buildings—again from street level—as the bedroom of the Wall House is located on the first floor. An intriguing aspect of the image is that it has been overexposed to the light filtering in through the window, leaving a ghostly streak across an inner supportive column, as if the city is beginning to bleed into the space of the bedroom. An animated one-minute video loop is projected over the photograph featuring a girl in a simple nightgown (very different from the negligee on the bed) mechanically and repetitiously pacing back and forth. The animated woman possesses no features that would identify her as being from any specific time or location. By projecting an illusory layer over the actual photograph, Xing simulates the process of the displacement of humans into non-descript, cellular architecture, as it occurs during the process of urbanization. Because the bedroom is located on the first floor, the woman is very close to the excitement of the city, and yet she remains isolated behind the wall of her home. The first paragraph of her artist's statement provides a good narrative to this composition:

Looking out the window is a view of a city—a large city, populated by people, buildings, cars, and roads. In this scale and from this perspective, distance and time are no longer simple realities of everyday life. People commute from one place to another, passing within centimeters and seconds of each other. We can be so close but at the same time so far away from each other physically and emotionally. This is [how] I picture big cities. As the material quality of life has improved, less intimacy remains; the more a city develops and expands, the further we are alienated from one another. Loneliness becomes a fact, which envelops our everyday life and feelings.²²

In her series *disCONNEXION*, *Duplication*, *Urban Fiction*, and *Wall House*, Xing Danwen explores the parameters of reality in modern society. The photographs that make up *disCONNEXION* and *Duplication* fulfill the modern viewer's expectation of beauty. The truth behind the mesmerizing pictures, however, reveals the depressing side-effects of modernization and all that comes with it. These works prove that even the most unjust realities can be disguised as beautiful compositions when the aesthetics of modernity are applied. While these photographs reveal the clear dichotomies of the ugly and the beautiful and the wrong and the right, the photographs that constitute *Urban Fiction* suggest that such a stark distinction is not always possible. These works assert that what was once fiction may now be a reality, and that what was once certain may now be questionable.

Notes

- ¹ Anthony D. King and Abidin Kusno, "On Beijing in the World: 'Postmodernism,' 'Globalization,' and the making of Transnational Space in China," in *Postmodernism in China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 64.
- ² Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Cities on the Move* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), 2.
- ³ Hou and Obrist, *Cities on the Move*, 2.
- ⁴ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Architecture of the Evicted," in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 159.
- ⁵ Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 112–13.
- ⁶ Xing Danwen, "disCONNEXION," <http://danwen.com/works/dis/statement.htm> (accessed December 12, 2008).
- ⁷ Gao Minglu, "Displacement and Transmutation: Reality and the Spectacle of Urban Life," in *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Buffalo: Albright Knox Gallery, 2005), 230.
- ⁸ Xing Danwen, "Duplication," <http://danwen.com/works/dup/statement.htm> (accessed December 12, 2008).
- ⁹ Clifford A. Pearson, "Asian Cities: Is 'Generic' the Wave of the Future?" *Architectural Record*, March 1996, 19.
- ¹⁰ Wu, *Transience*, 128.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Britta Erickson, "Interview with Xing Danwen: Talk about Urban Fiction" (Toronto: Gallery TPW, 2006), 1.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Andrew Maerkle, "Xing Danwen's Chinese Fantasy," *Art Asia Pacific* no. 49 (2006), 23.
- ¹⁶ Wu, *Transience*, 112.
- ¹⁷ David Spalding, "Ghosts among the Ruins: Urban Transformation in Contemporary Chinese Art," sites.cca.edu/currents/sightlines/pdfs/02dspalding.pdf (accessed December 12, 2008).
- ¹⁸ Erickson, "Interview with Xing Danwen," 2.
- ¹⁹ Wu, *Transience*, 119.
- ²⁰ Xing Danwen, "Wall House," <http://danwen.com/works/wallhouse/statement.html> (accessed May 11, 2009).
- ²¹ Xing Danwen, "Wall House," <http://danwen.com/works/wallhouse/statement.html> (accessed May 11, 2009).
- ²² Xing Danwen, "Wall House," <http://danwen.com/works/wallhouse/statement.html> (accessed May 11, 2009).