

The Chinese Dream

Alex Adriaansens

<http://www.v2.nl>

based on a interview with
with Anne Helmond

<http://www.annahelmond.nl>



Alex Adriaansens is one of the founders of V2_ Institute for Unstable Media (1981), of which he is director. He has given many talks and presentations around the world on topics including art and public space/domain; art & science; the construction of world models; space time constructs. He has curated and co-curated many exhibitions, symposia and public space events. He is also the artistic director of the DEAF festival. Alex is a member of the Advisory Board of Transmediale, Berlin; The Franck Mohr Institute for Media Art Education; eArts festival in Shanghai. He has been an advisor for different institutes and organisations in countries including China, Netherlands, Spain, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Germany, Croatia, France, Norway, Canada, and jury member of a variety of international art festivals and awards, including Ars Electronica (Austria), Transmediale (Germany), Share (Italy) and Laboral (Spain).

Workshop during eArts festival, Shanghai (October, 2008)

Over the last five years, V2_, Institute for the Unstable Media, has developed a series of activities in China varying from small-scale conferences and debates to large-scale exhibitions. V2_'s network now includes bloggers and independent art spaces, the National Museum of China and a number of universities. Alex Adriaansens talks about what V2_ is doing in China and what it hopes to achieve in the years ahead.

In the history and background of China, you can see that there's been a huge explosion of a so-called 'open market' over the last 20-25 years. China has opened up to outside influences. This also means that you are going to see new ideas about culture which you will need to take on board. A buoyant economy always goes hand in hand with cultural export. Looking at all the major influential regions over the last century and in America in particular, you can see how, fired by the booming US economy, American culture became a global export. In Japan, this is evident in the manga culture, which has swept the globe.

Japan and China excel at copying, amplifying and improving. They go about cultural innovation in a very different way to the Americans. The entire Southeast Asia region, to which China belongs, is developing at an exponential rate. People in the region are very aware that they are set to become significant

cultural exporters and players in the future. Right now, their main focus is knowledge development: see what is going on abroad, attract people to China and set up networks. After the Cultural Revolution, China was closed to outside influences and responded to what was going on in the world in a limited, selective fashion. Many Chinese know little about their own culture let alone other cultures, although this has changed over the last two decades, and has sparked great openness and curiosity about the West. This 'outward gaze' is often a way for the Chinese to discover themselves.

Universities as cultural beacons

Five years ago, Tsinghua University in Beijing, one of the largest universities in China, invited V2_ to discuss setting up a programme devoted to art, science, technology and society. Tsinghua University is famous and renowned for bringing forth the party leaders, and because the revolutions always originated there. An important university in the field of policy developments and 'the new coming man'. The universities are important players in China at the moment. They are places for innovation, or certainly were five years ago. The young generations meet here and can enjoy a large degree of openness thanks to the energetic exchange programme that is an integral part of the universities' large-scale cultural programmes. All the major universities have a museum. Tsinghua museum is larger than Boymans van Beuningen. Tsinghua University has a traditional art faculty and an industrial design department. China is very focused on creative industries, which is used as a kind of slogan for innovation. Precisely what the creative industries are is still being nailed down. Here in Europe and the Netherlands, no one really understands what creative industries are, and China is no different. It is a kind of catch-all for getting things started, and steering them in the right direction.

Five years ago, Tsinghua asked an intermediary to establish contact with a number of organisations in the world. The intermediaries are often Chinese who fled to the West in the 1980s, where they studied and now hold good jobs. They are being welcomed with open arms because they can act as a bridge between China and the West. They know both cultures and their ways of thinking and working. The Tsinghua intermediary was asked to see which parties might be interested in setting up a long-term trajectory. For the universities, this would be an incentive to new programmes, developing a network and a biennial or triennial in Beijing to act as an international point of contact and put Beijing in the position of playing an international role in artistic, scientific, technological and social developments. Three parties were invited to participate in this long-term strategy: Ars Electronica in Linz, ZKM in Karlsruhe and V2_. The programme was to centre around these three pioneering organisations. We then began

presentations of institutions: which are the institutions we consider important in this field? Can we feature them in a special exhibition linked to a three-day conference? 25 universities from China were also involved. One item on the agenda was how Tsinghua can act as a catalyst within the university world in China.

Looking back on the first meeting five years ago, it's obvious how rapidly things have changed in China. For the first exhibition, we sent a shipment of all our publications, but they got stuck in Customs. We were told that the books had to be approved by a committee for entry into the country. The day before the exhibition opened, they were released on the understanding that the publications were allowed into the exhibition but had to be shipped back to the Netherlands afterwards without leaving the exhibition space. I'd brought a similar suitcase with me which had got through Customs without a hitch. During that first year, we really had to learn how to deal with the official and unofficial sides of doing business in China: unofficially, there's quite a lot of freedom but official channels are subject to all kinds of rules and strict protocols.

The first exhibition and conference wasn't just a great discovery and positive journey, it was also the start of building a network in China. Primarily because 25 universities attended. The idea was to see how we could move on from this point. In the years that followed, we organised a larger exhibition and conference. It expanded. It was all about the artists and themes, not the institutions. In the second year, in 2005, I organised a small exhibition on behalf of V2_ as part of a larger exhibition exploring the relationship between media, art and public space. Public space is a very tricky theme in China. It is the most controlled domain. It is a particularly problematic area for the media because relationships very different in nature to those in the physical public space, spring up via media. During its period of explosive growth five years ago, China fully embraced the Internet and now boasts the highest number of Internet users and bloggers. All the online games are based in China. The blog community was thriving because it was a very informal way of communicating – a media channel to talk about anything and everything. Naturally, the Chinese government soon got wind of this and unleashed a 30,000-strong squad to get Internet traffic 'under control'. However, Chinese bloggers are supremely inventive in finding ways of getting material online through their networks.

Successes

After a couple of years in China the partners wondered if the time was ripe to organise the major event exploring themes relating to art, science and technology in which all parties, national and international, were represented.

The intermediary then involved the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC), one of the country's wealthiest and most influential museums. It was quite a strange move because young artists are reluctant to or avoid working with museums because museums represent the old guard and all that is slow, unwieldy and at fault in the institutions. However, two years ago, the NAMOC appointed a new, young, director to instigate change. If anyone can reinvigorate the museum world, it would be him. This was also one of the reasons why I decided to work with the institution. Our network is built on a web of informal organisations and small independent art spaces. We have contacts with more formal organisations but are mainly interested in the new, young organisations because of their greater long-term potential for the network.'

The collaboration with the NAMOC was a triumph. In June 2008, together with a number of parties, we organised *Synthetic Times – Media Art China 2008*,¹ which attracted 100,000 visitors over a three-week period. If the NAMOC organises an exhibition, the art world sits up and takes notice; all the museum directors saw the exhibition and formed an idea of it. The media reviewed it and the show received widespread attention. The exhibition's success prompted the NAMOC to turn it into an official triennial. The next edition is in 2011.

There are more success stories, even outside Beijing and the programme with Tsinghua University. We managed to build a huge network in China in a very short space of time. All the young organisations and players in China are looking for a place to meet foreign institutions. Factory 978 in the Beijing 978 Art Zone is an old industrial complex in China where young avant-garde artists have been working for the last 25 years. With small galleries and studios it was a kind of sanctuary for the arts. We also established contact with the bloggers community in China and with a number of architecture faculties. Urban development in China was significant to us because it encompasses issues concerning media and infrastructure and a new social cohesion in China. Urban development is, by definition, an anchor. This led us to realise that, although we could visit China each year, it was clear from my meetings with Chinese artists, curators and educators that what they really want is to connect with networks here. In 2007 we invited 23 young curators and artists for the DEAF festival with a China programme to give them opportunities for connecting with our international network. Everyone gets together during the DEAF festival, which is ideal for them. The Mondriaan Foundation gave them a tour of other institutions like Waag Society and the Netherlands Institute for Media Arts, so they could see how they operate. They also visited art colleges and institutions to get some idea of their activities.

¹
<http://www.mediaartchina.org>.

In addition, we presented a number of projects from China, the most important of which was *The Long March*. The aim of the project is to address and challenge realities and myths about China, its historical and political context, and potential future. The enterprise, organised by Chinese curators and artists, has been running for several years and follows the route of Mao Zedong's Long March through China that began in October 1934. Performances and workshops are held along the route to explore specific local cultural traditions such as paper-cutting and tattooing. The project focuses on the question: what is China's identity? What could it be? For many Chinese, The Long March was about underlining the fact that the nation's identity was in fact a Western import, and examined the West's views of exotic China. And the Chinese are quick to make this their own, while history and reality are very different.

Developing the network

V2_ has been concentrating efforts on developing the network with all kinds of partners in China: universities, small, independent artist's groups, young curators and several museums.

Hong Kong is the most European-oriented city, with great potential for activities. A theme such as art and public space is a common feature in festivals because it's easier to work in the public space there. This isn't the case in Beijing, for instance: there, I had to show a museum how projects work in the public space, and the kinds of themes they can deal with. Now, five years later, E-Arts, the party I worked with in Shanghai, has made public space and media one of its spearheads. This shows how much interest there is in the theme of public space, openness and exchange in Chinese cities, especially among cultural players, and that people are pushing back the boundaries. Definitely with the World Expo around the corner: if you could really open up the theme of public space, you'd really have achieved something. We set up a coalition on several levels with the E-Arts festival for the next three years: as international advisor to the festival, as advisor on an exhibition with Chinese artists this year, and as co-curator of E-Arts. In 2010 we will see if we can realise one or two media art and public space projects from the Netherlands during the World Expo in Shanghai.

It is a multi-phase programme. I generally start on a small scale with a party in China to see how the organisation works, who it consists of, how they operate and the network they belong to. In Shanghai, I have now met the owner of the largest LED screen in the world, for instance. They want to use it for cultural projects, so we're looking into that. Another project, the Oriental Tower, in the centre of Shanghai, will probably host an exhibition next year [2009]. Those are two important landmarks for foreigners in Shanghai, but E-Arts

are primarily concerned with how we can actively bring the festival to disadvantaged areas. As Shanghai is such a huge city, this will mainly take shape in 2010. This year, they organised the festival across three or four districts, with many activities in public parks. In Shanghai, for instance, there's a neighbourhood populated only by students – 150,000 of them. It was once built by a project developer: there are ten universities cheek by jowl all eager for social and cultural interaction in the public space. The festival can be instrumental in this. It can also involve this demographic in developing insights on art, culture, media and science.

E-Arts receive funding from the cultural development corporation in Shanghai and are supported by a number of Shanghai-based organisations but must achieve independence within four years. It is a monumental festival and, now in its second year, they opened a hotel with 150 rooms, a restaurant and large new exhibition space. The space is used for the festival and is hired out in between as commercial spaces. They generate revenue from the hotel, restaurant and exhibition space. It is a very young, hard-working organisation, but many of their difficulties are directly related to their small structural budget: they are unable to keep many of their project personnel, so lose knowledge. The intention is a smaller festival next year – a more concentrated event so there can be greater investment in teams and a solid team and organisational structure so that we'll have a strong organisation in place in 2010.

In China, they take a very different approach to us, with self-supporting spaces that generate income. A basic infrastructure that provides them with sufficient exhibition space to organise activities and host residencies throughout the year, with no extra costs because they have their own hotel and restaurant. The city provided them with the basic infrastructure cost-free. In the Netherlands we are used to having a structural relationship with the state but this is more complicated in China because the state wields more power and influence. The organisation is hoping to be completely self-supporting within four years, which will allow them to operate far more freely.

V2_ takes an international approach to national and international exhibitions. We only mentioned V2_ in the first exhibition. After that, we only featured our logo and secured the participation of Dutch and international artists, and organised many shows around specific themes. We haven't promoted e-culture as a specific sector – which in principle wasn't our mandate, either. We've always tried to see V2_ as representative, as a typically Dutch institution in that it works, thinks and works towards shaping internationalisation.

Entrance NAMOC museum Beijing. Design exhibition and entrance by Lars Spuybroek, sound installation by Edwin van der Heide



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EDITED BY
Cathy Brickwood

COPY EDITING
Cathy Brickwood
Puck de Klerk

IMAGE EDITING
Niels Kerssens

TRANSLATIONS
Lisa Holden (Eric Kluitenberg, Alex Adriaanssens)
Annabel Howland (Caroline Nevejan)
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